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Hinduism and Sexuality

Sexuality as it Pertains to Hindu Culture

As a world religion concentrated in India, many of the ideals on the intersection of Hinduism and sexuality are looked at through the eyes of Hindu's who occupy India. There are many components of sexual orientation and gender identity that are understood in varying ways by the United States and India. Specifically, the United States is progressively moving toward acceptance of the LGBTQIAP+ community. Whereas, India minimizes the LGBTQIAP+ community into the idea of third gender. All in all, contemporary India is not as progressive in accepting the third gender because they do not believe it is an issue that concerns them. This turns India off to the colonialism idea of pushing for tolerance of the LGBTQIAP+ community.

In Hindu tradition there are various texts that are read and interpreted in contrasting ways. For example, the Kama Sutra states, "homosexuality is one of the countless variations of Dharma... Homosexuality is part of the 'Third Nature', the neutral gender which does not engage in procreation and that corresponds to Brahma. Therefore, a person born homosexual that does not fulfill his/her 'third sex' function sins against his/her Dharma" (Yip et al., 231). Dharma is the truth and order in one's life, society, and the world. In Hindu culture, it is extremely important that one conforms to society when pursuing Dharma as the breaking of norms may result in a negative Karma in their next life. Additionally, it is necessary to recognize the Hindu tradition aims for individuals ultimate happiness. Moksa, the happiness of an individual, is also taken within the context of societal norms. The aim of Hindu tradition is to have utmost pleasure

in one's Dharma and Moksa. However, it may be subdued by the pressure that individuals in India feel to abide by society norms. With that being said, some LGBTQIAP+ people living in India or who practice Hinduism, stay closeted for the entirety of their lives in order to conform to society.

Third gender is similar to the LGBTQIAP+ community in the United States. It is comprised of both gender identity and sexual orientation. In the United States, gender identity and sexual orientation are separate entities. Gender identity is who someone identifies as, whether that be male, female, somewhere in the spectrum, or somewhere outside of the spectrum, whereas, sexual orientation is who an individual is attracted to. Although they are separate most of the time, there are instances in which gender identity and sexual orientation intersect. For example, often the two intersect when thinking about who an individual would like to be romantically involved with. Many people take into account the gender of the individual before they determine whether or not they would like to be involved with them due to their attraction to a specific gender identity. However, in Hindu culture, a Vaishnava monk explored “a Sanskrit reference to the original Hindu concept of a ‘third sex’ (*hijra*), which [the monk] defines as homosexuals, transgenders, and the intersexed, and how such individuals were constructively incorporated into ancient Indian society...but academic literature in various ways including transvestites, homosexuals, bisexuals, and hermaphrodites and which tend to be inadequate representations” (Yip et al., 234-235). The third gender of Hindu culture combines the idea of gender identity and sexual orientation making the two concepts the same entity. In comparison the United States and India see gender identity and sexual orientation extremely differently. As a result, there are some variations of how LGBTQIAP+ people are accepted in their respective countries.

The views of the LGBTQIAP+ community in ancient India are different from those of contemporary India. Specifically, in ancient India, “Hinduism traditions include proscriptions of homoeroticism, but these proscriptions are ambiguous and inconsistent” (Siker, 9). Additionally, from ancient Hinduism to contemporary Hinduism there have been significant changes. Yip et al describes, “Ancient expressions of Hinduism accommodated homosexual and transgender persons much more positively than contemporary India” (Yip et al., 235). Due to the vastness of interpretation of the Hindu culture there can be different views on inclusion. An example may be, an individual of the Brahmin caste who has a relationship with someone of the same sex might have been exempt from complying to societal norms because of their actual or perceived social status within the castes. However, if someone of a lower caste such as the Vaishyas were to be found having a same sex relationship there may be more severe consequences such as the loss of caste or ability to socialize within their caste system. Additionally, there may also be consequences in their next life due to their negative Karma. All in all, ancient Indian views are extremely different from those around the world.

Contemporary Indian views relating to Hinduism and sexuality are extremely different than those of ancient India. About ten years ago India “effectively legalized homosexual relations in 2009. The enactment, which potentially opened the door to further non-heterosexual rights such as civil unions, continues to be opposed by many influential conservative Hindu cadres and rightist political parties already alarmed by liberalizing tendencies around non-heterosexual issues” (Yip et al., p. 223). Furthermore, “the High Court of Delhi issued the controversial ruling that homosexual intercourse between two consenting adult males no longer constituted a criminal offence” (Yip et al., p. 224). This was an extremely important step towards equality for the LGBTQIAP+ community. However, the governments fight for oppression of the

LGBTQIOAP+ community of India does not stop there, “Navya Shastra, an international Hindu reform group based in Michigan, has been particularly critical of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council) (VHP) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) which came out against the repeal of Section 377 [, sodomy laws]. Both organizations claim to speak for Hindus in India and, in the case of the VHP, Hindus internationally. Navin Sinha, an official of the BJP, was quoted in 2008 stating ‘(The gay rights movement) ...is an abysmal, absurd thing...For 1,000 years these two things—I don’t even say the words (homosexuality and lesbianism)—have simply not been here’” (Yip et al., p. 228). Contemporary India is not as tolerant as many other countries around the world such as Australia, Canada, Ireland, and the United States who have voted for marriage equality on behalf of the LGBTQIAP+ community. In like manner, contemporary India is extremely harsh to those who have varying sexuality. For example:

“They describe how if a married woman is found to have had a same-sex relationship, she should have her head shaved, two of her fingers amputated and be made to ride (through her town) on a donkey. As supporters of non-heterosexual rights are keen to point out these provisions, quoted out of context, seem homophobic, but in fact they are concerned not with the gender of the partners but with the loss of virginity that rendered a young woman worthy unworthy of marriage. Moreover, while sex between non-virgin women incurs a very small fine, homosexual intercourse resulting in a replacement of the traditional concept of homosexual intercourse resulting in a loss of caste (applicable to the top three castes)” (Yip et al., p. 230).

The treatment of LGBTQIAP+ individuals in India is horrible and absolutely disgusting. It is important to understand the movement of castes as a result of one’s sexuality. With that said, if someone is found having a same sex relationship there are consequences within the caste

system. Specifically, “High caste men who have intercourse with other men are punished more than lower caste men who do the same; yet for women the opposite order applies” (Siker, 9). Specifically, men of the higher caste, for example the Brahmins, who have intercourse with other men move down in the caste, to Kshatriyas. Whereas, for women who are of two separate castes, the woman of the lower caste is punished more severely. Another key point is the importance of purity rules within the caste system. The castes of Hinduism work to improve their perceived or actual status through fulfillment of purity regulations that focus on diet, marriage, and education. Each caste embodies their own responsibilities and distinctions relating to caste purity rules. For example, the Brahmin protect the Vedas and the Shudras protect the purity of the upper castes, especially the Brahmins. Being part of the LGBTQIAP+ community in India could jeopardize one’s purity in their caste causing them to be isolated and further their negative Karma. Overall, contemporary India is not accepting of the LGBTQIAP+ community.

In both ancient and contemporary India, those who do not identify as cisgender or heterosexual are often cast out of their families. Sadly, this also happens in the United States. Approximately 40-60% of youth that are homeless identify within the LGBTQIAP+ community. Furthermore, in Indian society, societal norms of heterosexual couples are extremely rigid. Often in Hinduism, the male rules the household putting the woman in a submissive role. This can be seen when Hatcher describes, “the earthly duty of a wife toward her husband was more important for women than even their spiritual obligations and that this devotion could procure them supernatural powers” (Hatcher, 147). For instance, it is essential that someone of Hindu faith fulfill their Dharma which contributes to their good Karma in their next life. Therefore, it is of utmost importance that one fulfills the entirety of their Marga in order to receive good Karma.

Coupled with the above, the attempts of the colonialism of ideas being forced upon India make their acceptance of the LGBTQIAP+ community a little more complicated. India as a whole does not being told what they should and should not believe or implement, especially related to topics that affect their culture. Specifically related to the LGBTQIAP+ community, India believes they do not need to make strides towards acceptance due to their believe that India does not have anyone in the LGBTQIAP+ community living there. With that said, some of the folks in the LGBTQIAP+ community that practice Hinduism have chosen to leave India as their place of residence or choose not to ever come out due to the individuals fear of bad Karma and bringing impurity to their caste. In the long run, India does not appreciate the attempt of influence by other countries on their ideals. This causes India to be close minded to the progression of acceptance of the LGBTQIAP+ community.

In conclusion, it can be seen that acceptance of the LGBTQIAP+ community varies around the world. Explicitly, the United States is moving towards full acceptance and tolerance of the LGBTQIAP+ community. However, India compartmentalizes the entire community into the idea of a third gender. Ultimately, India still has a lot to do before there is acceptance of the LGBTQIAP+ community. Acceptance may start by India's willingness to listen to some of the perspectives of other countries who have taken steps towards acceptance of the LGBTQIAP+ community.

References

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