



Mythical Forgetting: A Detriment To Sexual Syncretism Of India

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Abstract: Mythological undercurrent and mythological consciousness, undoubtedly, cast a great and an undeniable influence on the cultural fabric of any civilisation or country. India, a land known for its cultural multiplicity and heterogeneity, has also received a great deal of impact from its mythological repertoire. India's rich mythological heritage has played a vital role in sustaining its cultural ethos throughout centuries. The problematic identity categories in India, such as caste, creed, and gender, have found support and validation in the narratives of Indian mythology. Similarly, mythological, literary and historical narratives have also accommodated same sex love and desire. However, paradoxically, despite its rich mythological repertoire which acknowledges homoerotic sensibilities, India has witnessed an unwavering lack of acceptance towards diverse sexual identities. The societal insistence on adhering strictly to heteronormative pattern of sexuality has traumatized the lives of sexual minorities which can be understood as an indifference to the mythical past which was sexually diverse. In this background, this article purports to delineate the process of a society forgetting its own heterogeneous mythological past which is same sex friendly, and thereby inculcating a hostile stance towards peripheral sexualities. In the meanwhile, the argument of the paper is also to demonstrate that Indian culture is superficially homophobic and deeply homophilic at its core. The research paper utilizes Queer Critical approaches to examine how a culture that once accommodated same-sex culture, owing to its interactions with external cultures, can develop hostility and prudishness towards non-normative sexual categories.

Keywords: Mythology, Heteronormativity, Sexual Minority, Queer.

Introduction

The debate over sexuality as a conflicting human phenomenon is not a recent one. Much has been written and discussed on the issue. Because, sex cannot be confined to a mere genital act as it is also a significant identity category that concerns with human dignity and human identity. Hence, when the identity of sexual minorities confronts threats by hetero-patriarchal dictums, it becomes necessary for the non-conforming sexual

categories to assert their voice, taking recourse to history and mythology to validate that their existence is as legitimate and rightful as the existence of heterosexual population.

Like there are norms in all other areas of human interactions, sexual landscape is also governed by a norm. And heteronormativity is the prevalent sexual norm which permeates all human societies (Rao 35). People who do not show conformity to this sexual norm are subjected to fierce condemnation and widespread discrimination. This compulsory heterosexualization of desire is responsible for the treatment of homosexual love as deviant and pathological. These people with different sexual orientations are often portrayed as deviant, perverted, or sinful or the sexual 'Other'. To add to their misery caused by this unacceptance and stigmatisation, a certain uninformed category of people in India still think that "homosexuality is a western fad that touched a few phony upper class Indians" (Rao 129). But, an unbiased analysis of some of the mythological, historical and literary narratives of India would reveal that homoerotic ambience has been present and regarded in Indian society and culture throughout.

Sexual Pluralism in the Ancient Narratives of India

India's mythology can be interpreted as same-sex friendly and there are instances not just of the tolerance of homoerotic desire but even the celebration of it. According to Ruth Vanita, a leading theorist of same sex love in India, there was tolerance and acceptance of sexual pluralism in the ancient Indian Culture. Many instances available in Hindu mythology to demonstrate that ancient India was same-sex friendly. Perhaps the best known in ancient Indian literature is that of Amba transforming into Shikhandin (Vanita and Kidwai 20). In the Matsya Purana, King Ila while wandering in the forest, enters a grove where Shiva and Parvati are sporting and Ila is transformed into a beautiful woman and his horse into a mare. Ila who is also known as Sudyamna, produces children both as man and as woman (Vanita and Kidwai 11).

Additionally, Ramayana and Mahabharata, the great epics of India also contain the depiction of gender shifting and sexual transience. The well-known description in the Valmiki's Ramayana is of the women Hanuman encounters in Ravana's palace in Lanka. They are described as lying semi clad in each other's arms as if with male lovers. And Hanuman feels guilt for intruding into their privacy and forgives himself for it was an inadvertent move by him (Vanita and Kidwai, Same- Sex Love 33). Another example to support the claim that homoerotic ambience is not unfamiliar in Indian culture is related to the deity Ayyappan. It is important to remember that the possibility of male-male union is not alien to Ayyappan since he is himself the product of such a coupling between Shiva and Vishnu (Menon, Infinite Variety, 74) This insistence on the company of men, Ayyappan, beckons us to a history of desire that actively resists heterosexuality. This could be Suggestive of many things- a camouflage, a sex change or simply an illusion.

The medieval text Krittivasa Ramayana gives a detailed account of King Dilipa's co widows producing such a son, Bhagiratha born of two 'bhagas (vulvas). In a text that appears in the Shiva Purana, there is an account of Agni swallowing Shiva's seed to lead

to Kartikeya's birth. Another noteworthy mention in the Shiva Purana is that of Ganesha; the fact that he is metaphorically wedded to the army of male ganas is suggested in his name 'Ganapati' which means 'lord/husband of the ganas' (Vanita and Kidwai 81, 82).

Not just the mythological literature but also the architecture of ancient and medieval India has given space for the expression of the homoerotic sensibilities. According to Shakunthala Devi 'Archaeologists in India have found pre-historic cave drawings showing female figures engaged in cunnilingus' (Menon, *Infinite Variety* 14). Historians and scholars have identified that there are sculptures of anal sex- and bestiality and threesomes and orgies- on the walls of Hindu and Jain temples at Khajuraho. "If we look at the 11th century sculptures from temples in Khajuraho, then what is immediately noticeable is that they contain sculptures only of the kinds of sexual acts that our current laws seem unable to name but are happy to penalize. There is not a single image of what the law would today understand as procreative sexuality." (Menon, *Infinite Variety*, 165). These findings of sexual transgression and sexual variety, and the explicitness in expressing desire whether between same sexes or opposite sex, mirror the sexual freedom with which people lived in pre-colonial India. "Temple sculptures from tenth century are so sexually explicit as to make Madonna seem like a nun." (Menon, *Law of Desire*, 309). What can be evidentially inferred with all this sexual explicitness, expressed on the temple walls and in literature is that there was free flowing homoerotic ambience in Indian culture, society and consciousness that circulated in various degree and forms without much obstruction.

It can be generally observed that reproductive obsession is an integral part of the Indian psyche. The life's mission for people gets completed and fulfilled only with offspring to continue the family lineage. This reproductive preoccupation is one of the major reasons behind the strong repudiation of non-productive sexualities. "But, the injunction to reproduce, for instance, does not exist in the many treatises on erotics including the Kamasutra which specifically uncouples desire from reproduction (Menon, *Infinite Variety*, 82).

So, the modern homophobia can be understood as a relatively recent predilection in India. This civilisation has been grounded in the idea of syncretism. The variety of sexualities coexisted without much friction. The 'river of desire' flew here with many tiny streams of different sexual orientations confluence into to it. From Vatsyayana's Kamasutra to the present, Indian sexology has been steeped in categorical multiplicity (Menon, *Infinite Variety* 318). The acceptance of sexual minorities, directly or indirectly, continued to prevail in the medieval times also. During the early medieval period, there are a few scattered references to same-sex love, while in the late medieval period; a huge body of literature develops (Vanita and Kidwai 107). It is indeed an unfortunate development that a sexually diverse culture steeped in sexual diversity shrunk into a homogenous one. It is only relatively recently in human history that the heterosexual monogamous relationship has come to be viewed as necessarily a married person's chief emotional outlet (Vanita, *Queering India*, 23). So these examples conformingly suggest

the sexual terrain of the pre-colonial India was not as squeamish as it turned out be in modern times. Love between men and love between women did not receive the kind of hostility it started to invite at later stages.

Sex change and undoing of gender and sexual categories is frequently found in ancient narratives. The Rig Veda tends to celebrate individual deities but when it does celebrate pairs, they are predominantly same-sex pairs rather than conjugal couples (Vanita and Kidwai 19). Thus ancient Indian Philosophy provides us with the tools to undo the categories of gender and sexuality. It seems that modern-western idea of gender as a social construction was already perceived long back in the ancient Indian philosophy. The idea that the gender and sexuality are not absolute categories but are made so through constant reinforcement is there in ancient philosophies. What the western thinkers and philosophers would call the social construction of gender that only appear to be natural, ancient Indian philosophers call the same as illusion that only appears to be real (Vanita and Kidwai 19). Conclusively, what becomes clear from the analysis of the aforementioned examples is that there were no violent punishments for men loving men and for women loving women. The overall atmosphere was non-judgmental in the matters of sexual plurality.

Colonial Intervention and the Erasure of Sexual Plurality

All the major queer theorists in India endorse upon the idea that the lineage of same sex desire is not alien to Indian culture. Homosexuality was known and practiced in ancient and pre-colonial India. They often take recourse to mythological and historical narratives to demonstrate their stand that “Hinduism has many homosexual myths and legends involving our gods and goddesses” (Rao 16). As has been pointed out by these writers this tradition of homoerotic ambience in literature has continued to exist even in medieval India. In rekhthi poetry of medieval India, men used to assume themselves to be women and write erotic versus to them (Vanita and Kidwai 2000).

The root cause of this sexual tyranny is nothing but the conspiracy of the British hegemony. To achieve their political and cultural supremacy, the colonizers were jubilant in interpellating their narrow idea of sexual morality into a heterogeneous society which was comfortable with the idea sexual diversity. “The Victorians foisted their quaint morality on us” (Rao 16). The loopholes in the Indian society were utilised by the colonial rulers that they extended their divide and rule policy to sexual arena as well. To impose their sexual morality and moral superiority they introduced “legal code against sexual proclivities that did not conduce to the reproduction of the missionary position” (Menon 17). The sexuality law introduced in 1861 reads “Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal, shall be punished with imprisonment for life, or with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine. Menon” (Menon The Law of Desire 127). This archaic and draconian law existed till very recently when Supreme Court of India decriminalised homosexuality in 2018. The Delhi High Court, in

2009, decriminalised homosexuality by reading down section 377 of the Indian Penal code. The judgement of the Delhi High court was overturned by the Honorable Supreme Court in 2013. This judgement was again repealed by the honourable Supreme Court in 2018, where it said in its judgement that consensual sex between two adults is not a crime (Rao 181). The sexual division that they injected into Indian society continues to plague us even today. "That we have poor sense of history only contributed to our amnesia or loss of our exuberant past that made us to forget the Kamasutra and Khajuraho. Today Indians do not read the Kamasutra, and most of do not even know where Khajuraho is" (Rao16). What we ought to realize, however, is that our myopic view of history makes the Victorians successful in their endeavour to erase our past" (Rao 17).

This Sexuality law, overladen with Victorian squeamishness, was unimaginably moralistic and adversely impractical and it entirely refuted the sexual ethos of India. This legal code, as Menon says, abhors any sexual intimacy that does not reproduce (The Law of Desire 111). Owing to this, a sexually pluralistic culture started to shroud itself with a monolithic sexual fabric. An irreducibly syncretic sexual landscape began to become pathetically homogeneous. "Heterosexism in India is widely prevalent in India on account of the obscuring historicity" (Rao 7). Because of this, Indians, at least the majority of them think that homosexuality has been an import from the West. Only the peno-vegal sex is validated and all other forms of sexuality are prohibited. Historical Amnesia occurred in delinking these colonized societies from their historicity (Vanitha and Kidwai. Queering India: Same-Sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society 2002).

Ascribing this erasure of sexual pluralism to European colonizers, Vanita says that the Native Americans were much more tolerant of same-sex relationships, but their cultures were steamrollered by the colonizers. Labels like abnormal, unnatural, and unhealthy are of relatively very recent origin India. Even the inventors of these labels, Euro-American psychologists, have already retracted them and come to the conclusion that same sex love is perfectly natural, normal healthy for many people (Vanita and Kidwai 36).

Therefore, it is not fallacious to say that indeterminate nature of desire prevailed in India. Desire's capability lies in its definitional and categorical indeterminacy and its resilience to be compartmentalised into any rigid categories. India's past had understood and practiced this non categorical nature of desire. Now, it is still not too late to reclaim the lost exuberance of the past.

Conclusion

The paper thus emphasizes the idea that Indian culture, on a deeper level, is homophilic. However, this homophilic core has been overshadowed by a superficially homophobic societal stance influenced by certain external cultural forces. Therefore, it is needed to revisit India's rich mythological heritage to verify if diverse sexual identities, including homoerotic sensibilities were accommodated by the scriptures. The concern of this paper at this juncture has been that owing to mythological amnesia, the contemporary society

exhibits a lack of acceptance towards these identities, adhering strictly to heteronormative patterns. Therefore, this paper emphasizes the importance of recognizing and reclaiming this mythological heritage as a means of promoting greater acceptance and understanding of sexual diversity in contemporary Indian society.

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