

## **LESBIAN CULTURE IN INDIA**

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### **Abstract**

*Indian society could be regarded as one of the most diverse societies on earth, created by centuries of internal faultiness along the lines of caste, (class)], religion and gender, the thus created divisions tend to affect particularly lesbian women adversely. The confluence of these internal divisions with a highly patriarchal form of state and social order results in the creation of complex webs of dependencies and oppression, within which women are caught, bound and silenced.*

*Marriage plays a very large role in this context, as the institution represents a solid pillar of Indian culture and tradition. Even today, (rural) India frowns upon single women who do not conform to these longstanding traditions of arranged marriages. In an attempt to avoid such condemnation, self-acknowledging lesbians do contemplate marrying homosexual men by entering into a marriage contract, as the LGBT organization Sangini states. It offers an alternative to lesbians that has the potential of enabling to have access to the same social, financial and political gains that other women can access through their husbands.*

*Interestingly, instances have been noted where lesbian couples married each other by invoking Hindu rituals that allow for a union of same-sex couples. Such engagements, however, have been the subject of much spite and hatred stoked by the media, leading politicians and religious leaders – and not least by ferocious female advocates of 'Indian traditions'. Fearing the subversion of set power hierarchies, and even their own positions in societies, spokeswomen like these tend to reinforce existing negative portrayals of lesbians. In contrast to these women, the male opposition is arguably born out of deep-seated fears of emasculation and an irrational fear that such unions would make men redundant.*

*Public outcries at marriages between women, such as the marriage of the two police women Leela and Urmila in 1987, who were severely chastised, have acted as deterrents for many women to*

*come 'out' and publicly marry their partners. Their case is a good example as it illustrates how 'coming out' in India puts women brave enough to do so into highly precarious situations; their everyday lives are underlined by a strong sense of uncertainty and under Section 377 of the IPC even the fear of being jailed for having 'abnormal' emotional and/or sexual preferences. The example additionally alludes to the difficulties that lesbians face once they are 'out': socially, economically and politically marginalized, these women are faced by rejection on every societal level. One example of such rejection is the discharge of Urmila and Leela from the civil service on grounds of 'inappropriate behaviour', a phenomenon that surfaces even today in the context of 'identified' lesbians in the workforce. Lesbians – as much as non-lesbian Indian women – are truly tied by a strong sense of communitarianism that demands their conformity with the community. So unless these women are willing to pay the high price of becoming social outcasts, they have to find ways of balancing their identities whilst living up the society's standards and their family's wishes.*



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The term 'lesbian' itself does not seem to exist in ancient India, since it is western in origin. So the only information can be from descriptions of same-sex relationships, whether man and man or woman and woman. Of these man to man relationships find much more mention and even acceptance. That, understandably, does not take away the fact that lesbianism existed and even flourished in ancient India. There are many evidences for this and even punishments charted out (though in a lower voice) in the texts.

The Indian epics and chronicles bear plentiful references to the same-sex intercourse . For instance, in the Valmiki Ramayana , Hanumana is said to have seen Rakshasa women kissing and embracing those women who have been kissed and embraced by Ravana. In the Padma Purana, is the story of a king who dies before he can give his two queens the magic potion that will make them pregnant. Desperate to bear his child , the widows drink the potion , make love to each other (one behaving as a man , the other as a woman) and conceive a child. Unfortunately, as two women are involved in the rite of conception, the child is born without bones or brain (according to ancient belief, the mother gives the fetus flesh , while the father gives the bone and brain). In these stories, the same-sex intercourse, born of frustration or desperation, is often a poor substitute of heterosexual sex. The Manusmriti scorns female homosexuals. It states, "If a girl does it (has sex) to another girl, she should be fined two hundred (pennies), be made to pay double (the girl's) bride-price, and receive ten whip (lashes). But if a (mature) woman does it to a girl, her head should be shaved immediately or two of her fingers should be cut off, and she should be made to ride on a donkey."

Any Indian or otherwise, who has had the pleasure of seeing the temple carvings in a remote village in Central India, Khajuraho, knows what the others have missed. The sculptures in Khajuraho make no distinction same-sex erotica and homosexuality. This could make one believe, there was certainly more same-sex love in ancient India than meets the eyes of the academicians. By beginning of the first millennium, the Indian society was more or less patriarchal. The acceptance of female sexuality also diminished steadily till the tenth century, when it all but disappeared, largely due to repeated and sustained Islamic invasions. But this period is also distinctive in that it saw the rise of Kali pantheon; again the emergence of female power- but this was more of a Brahminical reaction to Islamic religious forces. The rising had nothing to do with the respect for women or even the acceptance of their individuality, but to do with countering the widespread conversions to Islam. India at that time was burdened with

social evils and for the lower classes of the society , conversion meant some reprieve. This new awareness completely refused to recognize the existence of female sexuality, let alone accepting lesbianism. The sole purpose of women as sexual beings was procreation, and any kind of non-procreative sex (especially by women), was, in their minds, non-existent. Female sexuality in the collective social mind, became a property of the man she was married to, and hence, theoretically, ceased to exist.

With the coming of the Europeans, more havoc was wrecked on this already warped outlook, because they brought with them the distinction between various classes of women. There were the good wives and mothers in the Indian context, and there were those western women who drank wine and danced with men not their husbands- basically Eastern spirituality versus Western materialism. This led to further pushing of sexuality of the Indian women to the dark corners of the social mind...and except for a few enlightened intellectuals who talked openly of widow remarriage and women's education (which were considered sins during that period), no one thought of female sexuality as existing. The powerful Goddess pantheon was all but wiped out and Goddesses became nothing but consorts, properly wedded and bedded.

In contemporary India, there are many surprising facts that owe their surprise to the efforts of various agencies to brush them under the carpet and firmly keep them there. While gay rights and homosexuality is of course an issue for those whom it matters, lesbianism is still not mentioned openly. There are men activists but not women activists, there are rights for a gay marriage, but scarcely any female couple has exchanged vows in India, openly that is. It would seem that centuries of brushing under the carpet has put the fact of lesbianism and female sexuality firmly in the dark recesses of the Indian minds. Not even with the glorious revival of sexual rights in other fields, the right to dignity, the right to education, profession or financial freedom, asking for their fundamental right to be a sexual being.

Lesbians in India are conspicuous by their lack of visibility in their mainstream society. The first point in question is the denial of a lesbian identity. Extremely pertinent to lesbians in India, this question seeks to understand the manner in which they perceive themselves and their roles in society, and to regard how these perceptions are shaped by society. Intimately linked with the notion of public perceptions and their impact on lesbian women's decision is the issue of marriage. According to numerous LGBT support groups, marriage poses by far the largest problem that lesbians face- the second only to matters of identity. While marriage may affect the lives of many women in India, the lesbian case demands special attention, as it includes a dimension of fear of 'being found out' that impacts heavily on the quality of their lives.

India today has largely sought to marginalize and ignore the LGBT community. Ancient accounts of lesbian love exist but have been covered by layers of homophobia that are only slowly starting to fall off. For a long period of time, though, Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code encouraged such homophobic sentiments. Essentially, the section criminalizes particularly male homoerotic encounters and has served to reinforce what have been overwhelmingly negative public reactions to homosexuality. Discriminative attitudes like these have reportedly

had an impact on how lesbian women in general have perceived themselves and their position in the Indian society. The consequences of 'being found out' have been portrayed as being horrific: in many cases, women were forced out of their families into a community of 'social lepers', i.e. people who are regarded as being 'alien', 'normatively deviant' and cases of mental illness. The social stigma attached to being a lesbian could thus be seen as a reason for many women not to embrace their lesbianism, particularly not in the public sphere, instead of defining themselves with their lesbian identities as in common among many LGBT individuals in Europe. Accounts suggest, that suppressing one's sexual and emotional preferences and making them subservient to the family's wishes often seems like the easier solution. It is therefore not uncommon among lesbian women in India who have entered into heterosexual marriages turning to anonymous help lines for Indian women, struggling to balance their identity with society's ideal women: the motherly, feminine and 'pure' being.

Sadly, one of the most noticeable aspects about LGBT work done by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) is the fact that even within a community in which definitions of 'gender' are challenged and inverted, male/female inequalities still persist, in the same sense that lesbian and bisexual women's organizations seem to be much less publicly known than their male 'counterparts'. In some sense this lack of attention is rather convenient, as it secures the lesbians frequenting such organizations more anonymity. Anonymity and discretion are two highly valued principles that are upheld by LGBT support groups. It is therefore not surprising that many LB NGOs are located in urban areas, which provide a much larger scope for enveloping women in the anonymity they display. Efforts are channeled into increasing the comprehensiveness and inclusivity of programmes for lesbian women (see Sahayatrika in Kerala, a support group with a strong rural outreach programme). Identifying lesbians living in rural area however remains difficult. As a result, the rural space continues to be a highly problematic area for such outreach programmes. Interestingly, the internet has offered a way out of this dilemma: it has become one of the most accessible ways of offering lesbians help and support without subjecting them to public scrutiny.

Supporting lesbians in building up confidence in themselves and accepting this part of their identity has been a main objective of LB support groups. One way of approaching this issue has been by placing the lesbian in the Indian context by elucidating their role in Indian history and Hindu mythology. The literature on Indian lesbians of other faiths, particularly Islam, is rather obscure and suggests, that these women's sexuality may be covered under more layers of silence than lesbians of other faiths. Consequently, the majority of support groups tend to be Hindu-oriented, even if spiritual support is often not of their mission statement. The Gay and Lesbian Vaishnava Association (GALVA) take a different approach: looking to the past GALVA seeks to embed LGBT individuals within (Hindu) Vaishnava tradition, offering excerpts from the Bhagwad Gita that correspond to a modern understanding of homosexuality. Thus reinforcing lesbians' identities, granting them emotional security and a sense of self-esteem. In the wider scope of things, this approach adheres to a notion of human security and is supposed to assist in creating open and tolerant communities that are more amenable to accepting sexual minorities in their midst.



The Sanginii Trust is one such an organization; it is an LB organization focused on counseling and community support for Lesbians. One of their main aims is to dispel existing 'myths' about Lesbianism, such as Lesbianism as an alien concept, and to confirm that these women are, in fact, completely normal. They also offer practical advice and step-by-step solutions to questions such as 'Who should I tell?'. Much of Sanginii's efforts – both through online and personal counseling – is based on making these women feel more comfortable with their sexual, emotional preferences and their identities as lesbians. As referred to earlier, it is important to make these women feel confident in these identities, and to strengthen their assertiveness against societal notions of lesbianism as inherently unnatural.

Sangama and Sakhi, for instance, offer weekly group meetings for lesbians, thus combating feelings of isolation and giving them an opportunity to meet like-minded women while having open discussions about their sexuality. They further promise 'safe spaces', i.e. private niches that substitute for the lack of public space afforded to lesbians. Thus instead of having public 'cruising areas' like many of their male counterparts do, these women are offered back-door solutions with similar results: far removed from the public eye, these spaces are used to explore physical pleasure as part of an identity consolidation project. Such spaces can be seen as part of a larger strategy to combat lesbian's feelings of being misunderstood and misjudged by society. Another vital element of this strategy is the process of situating lesbians within India's socio-cultural and historical context.

Films such as 'Sancharram' and publications by lesbians living and writing abroad, such as Ruth Vanita, have successfully identified lesbian love as an important part of India's past and integral to India's future as a complex and diverse society. NGO work in this field thus targets lesbians through helplines, counseling and advocacy services, as well by attempting to influence the communities surrounding them by opening LB research centers and holding educational campaigns to raise awareness of lesbian invisibility in Indian society.

Ultimately, educational programs and campaigns for lesbians are geared towards making them understand and respect themselves and eventually, to empower them. The Samabhavana society offers such empowerment schemes by equipping lesbians with special training modules in an effort to increase their economic competitiveness and facilitate economic independence. They also provide for free sexual health clinics, ensuring the (good) health and safety of these women. Interestingly, some of the organisations, such as Sanginii, target the institution of marriage directly by offering legal advice in terms of documents needed for a contract marriage and by advising on the necessary further steps to take. Aanchal and Humrahi, two LB organizations for instance, point to alternative law forums that also offer legal advice, often in the context of being jailed in offense of Section 377.

This section was repealed in June 2009 after an intense lobbying period by HIV/AIDS prevention agencies, LGBT groups and Human Rights lawyers and was framed as a huge breakthrough. What was then celebrated as a complete decriminalization of LGBT sexualities has in reality changed little for lesbians. Only peripherally affected by the section in the first place, the revocation of the section has not resulted in large-scale change for lesbians. It did,

however, bring the issue of homoeroticism back into the public discourse. And with personalities like Amartya Sen and Bollywood star Celina Jaitley championing the repeal of this section, 'LGBT-ness' has become more acceptable – at least virtually.

## **Conclusion**

Lesbians in India could still be described as little more than shadows. Largely silenced and marginalized, these women are not recognized as legitimate part of the mainstream society yet. However, this is not an issue solely pertaining to the Indian society; rather, the overall trend seems to favour homosexual men over lesbian women. This trend suggests, that it may be a structural problem born out of inherent gender inequalities within the global system. In identifying such larger, structural inequalities, it might be advantageous to utilize a multipronged approach that focuses both on local and global action. While forging stronger ties between lesbian communities in various countries might strengthen their voices and would certainly help in determining similar problems and finding common solutions, it is also crucial to create a local community of lesbian women that feel confident enough to speak out. As mentioned in the report, a human security approach to the topic might be an effective way of doing so. Within the current scope of lesbian support action in India, this approach proposes to promote fairer societies by preventing the alienation of lesbians as important elements of society, regarding them as human beings that contribute to the character of a society.

Instead of targeting select groups then, this approach advocates a comprehensive approach, that includes involving mainstream society in lesbian issues, thus generating a deeper and more personal understanding of the issue. Lesbian NGOs in India have decided to take this path and it is now up to Indian society to accept this offer, in an effort to become more open, tolerant – and inclusive.

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