

# Positioning the LGBT Community within Indian Context

Dr. Manish Yadav

Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Rajasthan, Jaipur

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## ABSTRACT

*Indian society had an exact idea of people from every community of their society in the past. The gender binary of femininity and masculinity is also used to include all in the society so the idea of a third gender is dismissed. When anyone who does not conform to the commonly agreed definition of heterosexuality is labelled as an outcast. Indian mythology has portrayed gender identity and non-heterosexual sexuality. We can see how it challenged sexual norms and the commonly held gender binary, particularly in light of today's anti-homosexuality legislation, which are based on colonial rules. With the arrival of British colonisation, the culture went from being represented to being completely forgotten. The British are well-known for their treatment of transgender and queer issues. It is clear that the British played a major role in criminalising homosexuality and thus reinforcing the already established notion, particularly when viewed in the sense of Victorian morality. And it has continued in the society for a long time. As a result, the LGBTQ community had to face a lot of problems in existing in their sexuality. Nowadays it is seen that some changes are made in society as LGBT people are given chances in various filed other than the past.*

**Keywords:** LGBTQ+, Queer, myth, stereotype, gender fluidity

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## INTRODUCTION

“Bodies are not only biological phenomena but also complex social creations onto which meaning have been variously composed and imposed according to time and space.” (Katrina Karkazis)

Recently the discussions happened on gender politics and gender stereotypes are gaining acceleration. Conventionally, gender is something that is very much problematic in our society. Gender like all other social identities is socially constructed. So, the predefined roles of gender are clearly constructed and disseminated through time and space.

There is a general tendency to include everyone inside the gender binary that is femineity and masculinity. It completely rejects the possibility of a third gender. Third gender includes the vast spectrum of gender and sexual identities ranging from lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, etc. If someone who does not fit into the socially accepted notion of heterosexuality is treated as an outcast. The history of LGBTQ issues is not something that is presented in the pages of history. From time immemorial this group are present in society but got deliberately eliminated from the mainstream. Even in this advanced era of post-humanism, the issues faced by the community are diverse and multi-faceted. Their body and its representations are often subverted and ridiculed.

Even though the community has gone through various upliftment and empowerment in the last few decades, we can't say that society has embraced a queer friendly atmosphere. The reasons for the marginalization against LGBTQ+ are rooted in accepted morality code of Indian society. Conventionally Indian society is bound to myth and superstition. In the case of queer representation, our myths have given space for its portrayal.

Gender diversity and non-heterosexual sexuality have been depicted in Hindu myths by heroes and incidents. When we see that in the light of today's anti homosexuality statutes, which are founded on imperial laws, we can see how it defied sexual stereotypes and the widely held gender binary. From Puranas we get the evidences of so third gender, homosexual characters and even changes of identities are mentioned as incarnation. Not only Puranas but regional mythologies, epics also contain stories of LGBTQ characters in ancient era. It shows that even though the Indian society existed then supported heterosexuality, they have given a space to LGBTQ community. From recorded files like

epics, folk tales, poems, sculptures and other forms of arts understand the LGBTQ themes can be read and is clearly visible. But gradually their presence in the mainstream social sphere reduces which at last made them a community of social outcasts. This paper tries to trace the representations of LGBTQ community in myths, folklore and also studies the marginalisation faced by them from history till now in India.

### AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

This research paper aims at fulfilling the following aims and objectives:

- To understand the issues faced by Queer community
- To show the portrayals of LGBTQ in India myths and how they lost their space in society through history
- To analyze the importance LGBTQ rights and their existence in society

### HYPOTHESIS

Gender and the notion related to it are often problematic. Recently many studies around the globe try to define the problems associated with the accepted ideas of gender and its nuances. Society tends to include everyone inside the binary- femininity, and masculinity. From time immemorial, the traits associated with each of this gender are framed and those who don't fit this are isolated or 'othered'. When analyzing history, we find that the LGBT community was always excluded from society. From rural areas to the world's most modern 'civilized' society LGBTQ individuals are seen as aliens. Just like any other human in this world they have the right to live and contribute to society. Understanding misconceptions and beliefs about the LGBTQ community can make a change in their place in society. Discrimination against the LGBT community is illegal still they face a lot of violence. LGBTQ communities recently are given protection under the law but they are not culturally accepted in the society.

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Most of the literary works on the LGBTQ community can only give readers a sentimental approach. Their problems are being addressed recently but there is a tendency to normalize their issues especially the mental and physical conditions they face. A queer approach, on the other hand, can make the readers understand and highlight sexual preference and gender roles, by interrogating heteronormativity by accepting a diverse variety of cultures, genders, and desires, as well as emphasizing the sexual, dismantling the notion of what constitutes normalcy within them.

The present study discusses the attitude of Indian culture towards the LGBTQ community from history till now. It also portrays the issues they face in society in different phases of life.

Books, journals, blogs, and interviews are used as secondary sources. The study is an analysis of mythical stories in Indian epics, folklores, blogs, and LGBTQ rights. The methodology is used as per the MLA Style sheet. Apart from this, almost all directives and guidelines are followed as per the norms and suggestions relating to the research study. For the present study, a broad range of data is collected. Different types of references and critical books relating to this specific area are collected.

### Tracing the Position of LGBT Community within the Indian Context

A few mythical and folkloric characters which defy the gender stereotypes and binaries are *Mohini* the female avatar of Vishnu, *Shikhandi*, the daughter of Panchala King Drupada, the famous *Ardhanareeshwara* concept, *Devibahuchara* the godly figure of transgender community and many other incarnations of several ones. Curses in Indian mythology and Puranas are a way of referencing the gender transition. Someone will be cursed and results in gender transition, and on several occasions, the Gods are seen deliberately switching between genders like in the case of *Mohini*.

*Mohini*, Lord Vishnu's female incarnation, is one such story that is well-known in Indian mythology. The story starts as an elixir of immortality was taken away by Asura/ demons. So, Lord Vishnu was requested to retrieve the elixir back from the demons, to bring back the elixir Lord Vishnu decided to change his form into a woman *Mohini*. *Mohini* infiltrated the demon's world and came back with the elixir of immortality. It is portrayed in Brahmanda Purana that Lord Shiva was attracted to Lord Vishnu's incarnation of *Mohini*. This fluidity of gender in sexual attraction is told in Bhagavata Purana as the union of Lord Shiva and *Mohini* resulted in the birth of Lord Ayyappa.

Vishnu, who was born as Krishna, takes on the form of *Mohini* to marry Aravan in one of his incarnations. Aravan was son of Naga Princess, Uloopi and Arjuna, one of the pandavas. During the Kurukshetra war Aravan was summoned by the elders and was given an order that he knew he could get killed. But he accepted it without any objection but

made a demand that he wanted to get married. No woman wanted to have a partner like Aravan so Lord Krishna came forward and transformed to *Mohini* to marry Aravan. In some area in modern India Aravan is considered as a patron god to some LGBTQ community.

Shikhandi was older sister of Dhrishtadyumna and Draupadi, and the eldest daughter of King of Panchala, King Drupad. Shikhandi was born Shikhandini, Panchala King Drupada's daughter, and raised as a boy, according to legend. She was thought to be the reincarnation of Amba, who sought vengeance against Bhishma. On the tenth day of Kurukshetra war Bhishma was assigned to be the army general. Pandavas knew it's impossible to outwit Bhishma as he is very skilled and also a great warrior. So, Lord Krishna plotted the plan to use Shikhandi as a barrier to protect Arjuna as it is earlier mentioned that Bhishma's reason of death will be neither a man nor a woman. Bhishma was aware that Shikhandi was in fact the incarnation of Amba so he lowered his bow and accepted death

The tale of Arjuna's gender variance can be found in one of the Mahabharata versions. When Arjuna rejected Urvashi, she cursed him, and he became a part of the third gender as a result. Arjuna used the chance as the ultimate camouflage during his final year in exile. During the period of exile Arjuna took the name Brihandala and wore women's clothing. He introduced himself as a performing artist to King Virata. The king appointed him to teach his daughter Uthara and her maids.

In Padma Purana it is mentioned that Arjuna was transformed into a lady so that he is able to attend Lord Krishna's mystical dance in which only ladies were allowed to participate in. Ardhanarishvara concept is very famous in Indian legends, it is the androgynous form of Lord Shiva and Parvati. It shows the masculinity and femininity combined from both Shiva and Parvati.

There are a lot of patrons of transgender community in Indian folklore. One among them is Devi Bahuchura. The story of Devi Bahuchura influenced the community so much that a temple was made and placed her as the deity. It is located in Becharaji town in Mehsana in the district of Gujarat. It is said that a bandit named Bapiya tried to rape her when was in a caravan with her sisters. She cut off her breast in an attempt to scare the bandit away. To defeat the bandit, the goddess did not use violence. She also demanded that he repent for his misbehaviour by dressing and acting like a woman.

And apart from these allusions, Indian astrological tales often mention a number of LGBTQ characters. BudhGraha is a well-known example of such a tale. Sage Brihaspati and Tara raised him as his child. During the delivery of the child Brihaspathy came to know that the child was illegitimate son of Tara and Chandra (Moon-god). The child was cursed by Brihaspathy that the infant would be neither male nor female.

All these stories clearly suggest that there was the acceptance of LGBTQ in ancient myths and folklores. The homoerotic subtext, other previously mentioned occurrences and characters work inside a particular perspective yet it accommodates gender and sexual difference woven into the account of the Puranas and the preserved ancient texts as regularly happening scenario

The community has gone from this representation to complete disappearance with the advent of British colonialism. Britishers are notorious in treating transgender and queer related issues. Especially when we view this in the context of Victorian morality, it is clear that British played a major role in criminalizing homosexuality and thereby strengthening the already existing notion. British colonialism had an impact on criminalising homosexuality, from Asia to America they had controlled 49 countries and laws were made in these countries that homosexuality is a criminal activity. The co-author of 2017 ILGA "State sponsored Homophobia", Lucas Mendos tells that those 31 countries still follow the rule made by Britishers. Malaysia, Pakistan, and Uganda are among the countries involved.

When it came to anatomy, the Victorian puritanical belief system had clear reproductive assumptions. The laws drafted and enacted in India during that time period represented this value system.

The Indian Penal Code, Section 377, was drafted in 1860. The usage of words like "unnatural" and "order of nature" is explicitly shown in this section. Any sexual practises that were not procreative in nature were labelled as "unnatural" and "against the order of nature" according to Judeo-Christian philosophy. This segment focuses on bestiality and the act of Sodomy between men and women. The principle of freedom of speech, democracy, and liberty, as well as a Constitution for India, were all brought home during the post-independence period. Non-discrimination based on caste, ethnicity, language, or sex is one of our constitution's basic rights. The word "sex" was used in Constitution in the strict physical sense of being a male or woman.



In 2018 the Supreme Court of India took the landmark decision of striking down the portion of Section 377 of IPC (Indian Penal Code), 1860, which has criminalised same sex relation and also negatively affected the existence of LGBT community, as well as for being out of step with contemporary morals. The aim of Supreme Court decision was to give the rights for homosexual people to live with dignity, free from all those shames they had to face because of their sexual orientation, with full freedom and as equal as any other citizen of the country.

To decriminalise section 377 the Supreme Court took the fundamental rights to validate the process. It was seen that LGBT community was denied their fundamental rights as homosexuality is criminalised. Analysing the rights given to them: The first was Right to Equality under Article 14, the second was Right against Discrimination, third Right to freedom of speech and expression under Article 19 and the final was Right to privacy under Article 21.

Nowadays many initiatives are done for the LGBT community by various groups. For the queer culture in India, NGOs (non-governmental organisations, also known as non-profit organisations) and various forms of organisations have long been a cornerstone. Some are social groups or conversation groups with some regular activities that act as conveners who can help provide continuity by arranging discussion topics for each week's meeting, for example. Another group is classified as "collectives" to reflect particular aspects of their organisation or specific socio-political roles such as cooperative work; even others are more ad hoc, even although they gather under a group name, they do not seem to have an official representative. There are participants who are stand as "moderators" just like a Facebook page's community to look over and manage the feeds. The LGBT community discusses sex and sexuality and they categorise it in a variety of ways depending on classes and individuals. Within the community some people use LGBT, LGBTQIA+ or similar acronym while others prefer queer. To have a platform to discuss the aforementioned activities these NGOs provide accessible social or meeting places

There are many issues and concerns they faced and are still facing. One of the major concerns of queer is their body and its portrayals. Body politics are inextricably linked to transgender identity, especially how transgender people can physically express gender in ways that differ from their assigned sex at birth, and how some may change their bodies. Queer theorists consider that one of way to assert queer identity is through their body. Recently through films and literature there arises a genuine attempt of portraying queerness.

Most people think that we can change a person's sexual orientation and gender identity. Sexual identity cannot be altered, according to the World Health Organization. Attempts to persuade lesbians, gays, and bisexuals to change their sexual identity are ineffective, harmful, and actually torturous. The World Health Organization publicly stated more than 20 years ago that homosexuality is neither an illness nor a disease, emphasizing that it is a normal and non-pathological variation in human sexuality.

One of the major misconceptions about the LGBT community is that all LGBTI people have HIV/AIDS. This is clearly not the case. HIV/AIDS affects gay, cis-gender, and LGBTI men and women to different degrees depending on the epidemic's characteristics. It is mainly an issue among the heterosexual community in some parts of the world. However, stigma, bigotry, and alienation of LGBTI people do result in a lack of access to HIV and safe sex practices information, prevention, testing, treatment, care, and support. As a result, LGBTI people (especially transgender women) are at a higher risk of contracting HIV. The best way to end the HIV epidemic for all, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, is to reduce stigma, eradicate discrimination, and loneliness, and improve access to treatment.

People also believe that being around LGBTI people or having access to information on homosexuality endangers the wellbeing of children. This is a fabrication. Learning about LGBTI people or spending time with them has little impact on minors' sexual orientation or gender identity, nor does it affect their well-being. There is no connection between child violence and being gay, homosexual, bisexual, or transgender. Evidence suggests that LGBTI people, including straight and cisgender people, are good parents, students, and role models for young people all over the world. It is inaccurate and disrespectful to portray homosexual, gay, bisexual, or transsexual people as pedophiles or as children's dangers. It serves as a diversion from the urgent need to take serious and appropriate steps to protect all children, especially those who are coming to terms with their sexual orientation and gender identity. Sexual harassment of any kind, even against minors, should be stopped and prosecuted no matter whether it occurs or who is involved.

What is real is that many of the criminal codes that are still in place today in many countries to prosecute LGBTI citizens are Western in nature and are a legacy of 19th century colonial powers. And if most former imperial states no longer have these unjust rules in force, this is still the case. Many have been replaced by laws that encourage equality.

Negative feelings or attitudes about non-heterosexual behavior, sexuality, marriages, and society can lead to racist behavior, which is a source of discrimination for many lesbians, homosexuals, bisexuals, and transgender people. Homophobia can manifest itself in a variety of ways, including homophobic jokes, violent attacks, workplace discrimination, and negative media coverage. People who have been taught to believe that homosexuality is false can experience feelings of shame and self-loathing as they realize they may be gay. This can lead to poor self-esteem and low self-esteem. Suppressing homosexuality involves ignoring an important part of a person's personality, which can have a major impact on their life and relationships. In addition, deciding whether or not to come out may be a cause of significant emotional anxiety. When LGBT people come out in public about their sexual orientation, they can face bigotry and harassment from their family, coworkers, and the general public. Homophobia has the ability to damage and interrupt people's lives significantly. As a result of their families' alienation after revealing their sexual orientation, many LGBT people have become homeless. In many cases they are forced to flee from their native place. Homophobic individuals play a major role in interfering in the lives of LGBT people. As a consequence, they harass LGBT people mentally or physically and assault them. As a result of their attitudes, LGBT people face tension, dissatisfaction with their living environment, physical disruption, depression, and ostracism.

Psychological distress is another problem that LGBTQ community face when they reveal their sexuality. LGBT individuals face substantial amounts of stigmatization, discrimination, and bullying on a regular basis in their daily life. The majority of LGBT people learn to cope with this, because if they have supportive families and friends and participate in LGBT organizations and social networks. However, in the absence of assistance, a vast number of LGBT people, mostly younger LGBT people, have had to cope with stigmatization, discrimination, and violence. High levels of homophobic bullying in schools, as well as physical and verbal attacks, are often stressful for many. As a result, they suffered from psychological abuse, self-harm, and suicidality at elevated rates. Many LGBT teenagers may feel alone because they are debating their sexual orientation or gender identity without being encouraged. They may feel particularly vulnerable when they approach maturity, a critical stage of social and emotional development. Cities allow LGBT people to select which facets of their life they want to be out of and of whom they want to be out of them, such as at work, with friends, family, neighbors, medical services, and associative activities. It's even more daunting for LGBT people to come out in rural areas. This is made more difficult in rural areas, where being out of one domain, such as at work, means that one's society, family, and colleagues are more likely to be aware of one is LGBT. LGBT citizens in rural areas could be more likely than the general public to leave the community where they were born or raised. Thus, from an early stage of life they become orphans. It deteriorates their mental health and attitude, it may lead to depression, anxiety, panic attacks etc.

Extreme depression, anxiety, loneliness, social discontent, and being depressed are all manifestations of these emotions. It isn't entirely down to their gender identity! In a patriarchal society, being gender nonconforming is very distressing. In fact, there is so much anxiety that it may be considered a mental illness. Living in an often-homophobic society, facing family rejection, and being out as gay in any or all facets of life are all possible causes. Mental disorders are the results of discrimination and traumatic interactions, it is not of sexual orientation. Owing to violence, social isolation, and depression, the LGBT community has higher rates of anxiety, attitude, and substance use issues, as well as suicidal tendencies. Depression and anxiety are more common in gay and bisexual men and women than in heterosexual men and women. Bisexual women have been shown to have marginally worse mental health than homosexual or heterosexual women, perhaps as a result of isolation from both gay and straight communities.

LGBT individuals have not been passive victims of racism and sexism, despite pervasive stigma by members of sexual and gender minority groups. Over the last few decades, LGBT people's achievements in building a community infrastructure that addresses their health needs, as well as obtaining recognition of their health concerns from scientific bodies and government entities, attest to their commitment to resisting stigma and working actively for equal treatment in all aspects of their lives, including having access to appropriate healthcare. Indeed, some of the observations cited demonstrate the extraordinary psychological resiliency shown by members of these communities, despite being under a great deal of stress.

In addition to homophobia, lesbians, homosexuals, bisexuals, and transsexual people face discrimination and poverty on a daily basis. Workplace discrimination against LGBT people is a significant factor in LGBT people's socioeconomic status. Gay and transsexual people suffer socioeconomic inequalities as a result of systemic job discrimination. Discrimination leads to insecurity and job instability, resulting in higher unemployment and poverty rates for homosexual and transgender individuals, as well as a wage gap between gay and straight people. People who identify as LGBT do not benefit better than people who identify as straight. LGBT individuals still make less than their straight peers.

LGBT individuals face many obstacles, risks, and barriers, making it difficult for them to locate and receive competent, affirming healthcare. Many LGBT people are fearful of getting a negative experience if they seek help because of heterosexist assumptions. Some therapist remains unaware of the sexuality in front of them, and not all organizations and individual therapists are LGBT-friendly. Employees should not be prejudiced against LGBT people or misinformed about LGBT programs.

Lesbians, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender people (LGBT) face a variety of issues as they age. They still lack access to adequate health services, affordable housing, and other social support, owing to institutionalized heterosexism. The majority of LGBT seniors do not participate in services like the majority of heterosexual seniors do. Many people retreat into their closets, deepening their feelings of isolation. Many LGBT elders face social isolation and ageism within the LGBT population. LGBT elders are confronted with a variety of circumstances. They're also impacted by the fact that they don't all have the same family support systems as heterosexuals.

There is very little and scant research on the lives of older LGBT people. Nursing homes continue to ignore LGBT seniors. Nursing home rules, in combination with bigotry and abusive treatment by staff and other inmates, can create hostile environments for the elderly who are unable to speak for themselves. Hate crimes and violence against LGBTQ people and others consider blaming LGBT are common. In their daily lives, LGBT people face discrimination and shame, as well as sexual and physical harassment, brutality, and hate crimes. As mentioned earlier, coming out (announcing one's LGBTQ status to others), gender transitions, bullying, isolation and alienation, a lack of family or social care, and the consequences of HIV and AIDS are all factors that can affect LGBT people's mental health and well-being. However, the perspectives of LGBT people who have become victims of violence and discrimination differ depending on race, gender, wealth, immigration status, and language barriers. Because of their ethnicity and history, as well as their sexual and gender identity, LGBT refugees are more likely to face discrimination.

## CONCLUSION

India is attempting to become a superpower and world leader in the twenty-first century; in reality, it has all the ability to do so. However, this opportunity cannot be achieved unless and until we as a culture are unable to openly embrace and debate so-called taboo topics like homosexuality. And, for it to happen, people's mentalities must be altered. Sex education in schools and at home is the first step. A child must feel at ease discussing his or her sexual difficulties or concerns, including sexual choices, with his or her parents or teachers. It is also important that parents/teachers thoroughly comprehend their children's condition and have appropriate guidance. As a result, not just children but also teenagers and adults need more education and sensitization when it comes to sex concerns. Sensitization of law enforcement personnel, such as police, is often needed so that they can understand the real needs of LGBT people.

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