

Chapter 2

Queer in Ancient Indian Literature

While the Introduction sets the tone for the thesis and firmly locates it in its genre, this chapter builds upon that base by locating the representation of queer in ancient Indian literature. The chapter explores various aspects of queer life as presented in ancient Indian literature; the first section inspects the *Kamasutra* for the various definitions and categories of queer as it was documented at the time; the second section looks at the representation of queer through the stories of Gods and mythological characters who exhibited signs of queerness; the third and final section of the chapter revisits the *Kamasutra* as it was translated in post-colonial India, compares it to the original, marks the changes it has undergone and explores how this affects the readers. However, to do so, it is crucial to begin at the beginning. At the beginning of creation, the Vedas were issued forth from Brahma. Manu created the verses of civic virtues and ethics, compiling the Dharma Shastras; Brihaspati set aside the verses concerning politics, economics, and prosperity, compiling the Artha Shastras; and Nandi, Shiva's companion set aside the verses concerning senses, pleasure, and sexuality, thus compiling the Kama Shastras (Danielou, 1994, 3-4). This Kama Shastra was put into writing by Vyasadeva approximately five thousand years ago along with other ancient Indian texts (Danielou, 1994, 4). It was then divided into many parts and lost until the Gupta period when Sage Vatsyayana recompiled the text around 300AD (Danielou, 1994, 4). Thus, the *Kamasutra*, or the 'codes of sensual pleasure' was born. Although the *Kamasutra* is found among Westerners as an erotic sex manual, a reading of the unabridged and original work provides a rare glimpse into the sexual understanding of ancient India.

The existence of the third sex, people who were by nature considered to be a combination of male and female, is acknowledged by Hinduism and celebrated in many ways. They were described in the *Kamasutra* and were not considered to be against the norms of society as described in the Dharma Shastras. They were described as homosexual, transgender, and intersex people who were considered such by birth and were encouraged to live their life according to their nature. Gay males were not allowed to marry women and lesbian women did not marry men and were

allowed to earn their living independently. Even homosexual marriages were encouraged and allowed as written in the Kama Shastras (Danielou, 1994, 196).

The recognition of the third sex in India is highly relevant in many ways. In ancient Indian literature, sex or genders are divided into three categories—*pums prakriti* or male, *stri prakriti* or female, and *tritya prakriti* or third sex (Prabhupada, 1987, 53; Danielou, 1994, 82; Levacy, 1999, 275; Buhler, 1886, 266). These categories are not determined solely by physical characteristics but through an assessment of the physical body, the psychological body, and the procreative status of the individual. The term *Prakriti* refers to the roles that both the physical and psychological aspects play in an individual. This analysis of the different sexes or genders is executed in detail in the *Kamasutra*.

In the eighth and ninth chapters of the second part of the *Kamasutra*, the third sex is described as a combination of the male and female natures. People of the third sex are mentioned in different ways in ancient Indian literature due to their variety of manifestations. They were not expected to assume any masculine or feminine roles in society. They were classified under a larger social category known as the neutral gender. They were also called *napumsaka* meaning ‘those who do not engage in procreation’. There were five different types of *napumsaka* (i) children, (ii) the elderly, (iii) the impotent, (iv) the celibate, and (v) the third sex (Danielou, 1994, 82). People belonging to this third sex were protected under the ancient Indian laws and were believed to bring good luck. They did not engage in sexual reproduction.

Ancient Indian society was all encompassing and accepting of all sexes and genders. All classes of people were accommodated and engaged in accordance to their gender. They were neither persecuted nor denied their basic rights. They would live in their own sections or quarters of society, live peacefully within marriage, and practice all means of livelihood. Gay males could blend in society as men or they could cross-dress as women. They were considered to be experts in singing, dancing, acting, hairstylists, house servants, and so on. They were also employed in different sections of the royal palace. Transgenders were invited to attend all birth, marriage and religious ceremonies as their presence was considered to be auspicious (Danielou, 1994, 481). Lesbians were not expected to accept a husband and were permitted to each their own livelihood as independent women. They were known as *svarinis*. Thus,

all categories of gender were awarded their own particular status and welcomed in society.

I. Categories of Queer in Ancient Indian Literature

Ancient Indian literature is comprised of numerous Sanskrit texts that contain information regarding the third sex and its members, behaviours, practices, and roles within society. According to the Kama Shastra, people of the third sex (*tritya prakriti*) are of two kinds in accordance to their appearance—

“Members of the third sex are first categorized according to whether their physical characteristics are either male or female. These are known as *kliba*, or gay males, and *svairini*, or lesbians. Each of these categories is then divided into two, depending upon whether their behaviour is either masculine or feminine. They are then further divided into many subcategories.” (*Kamasutra*, 2.9.1, Danielou)

The various categories of their division are—

i. Lesbians (*Svarinis*)

The lesbian is first described in the Kama Shastra with regard to aggressive behaviour in women (*purushayita*) (Danielou, 1994, 482). The Sanskrit word ‘*Svarini*’ denotes an independent woman who earns her own living, is unmarried, and lives either alone or in marriage with another woman. The various types of *svairini* homosexual behaviours is enumerated in great detail within this chapter. Lesbians could marry and raise children and were readily accommodated within society. Those who did not produce children were known as ‘*nastriya*’ or ‘not female’. Women belonging to this category engaged in all means of livelihood including government services, entertainment, trade, and even employed as courtesans or prostitutes, or as maidservants. They would also sometimes renounce worldly possessions and follow ascetic vows (Danielou, 1994, 482).

ii. Gay (*Kliba*)

The word ‘*Kliba*’ can be referred to any type of impotent man but in this case, it is used to describe men who are impotent with women due to their homosexual nature. Gay men are described in the chapter of the *Kamasutra* concerning oral sex (*auparishtaka*). Oral sex is forbidden for Brahmanas, and not recommended for

heterosexual relationships either. However, it is considered natural for people of the third sex who do not participate in celibacy. Men who take the submissive role in oral sex are known as *mukhebhaga* or *asekya* in Sanskrit. Gay men with feminine qualities are described in the *Kamasutra* as—

“Gay men with feminine qualities are the most recognizable members of the third sex. For this reason, they have often kept their own societies within all cultures of the world. They generally keep long hair and arrange it in braids or in a womanly fashion. Those who dress up as females are known as transvestites. Feminine gay males were often professionally employed by aristocratic women and commonly served within the royal palace. They are proficient in the arts, entertainment, and most notably, dancing. As mentioned earlier, their presence at marriage and religious ceremonies was considered to invoke auspiciousness, and their blessings were much sought after.” (*Kamasutra*, 2.9.2, Danielou)

The masculine gay male is then described as—

“The masculine gay male is not as easily recognizable and would often blend into ordinary society, living either independently or within marriage to another man. Some were known to become professional male prostitutes who worked as masseurs. The technique of these masseurs is described in much detail. While effeminate gay men would keep smooth skin, apply makeup, and sometimes don breasts, the masculine gay male would keep bodily hairs, grow moustaches or small beards, and maintain a muscular physique. They would often wear shiny earrings. Gay men were talented in many different ways and were engaged in all means of livelihood. They often served as house attendants to wealthy *vaishnavyas* (merchants) or as chamberlains and ministers to government officials. Such men were renowned for their loyalty and devotion. Sometimes gay men would live as renunciates and develop clairvoyant powers. Those practicing celibacy were often used as *pujaris* (temple priests). (*Kamasutra*, 2.9.6, Danielou)

Gay males were believed to typically engage in fraternal or casual love but were sometimes known to marry each other. Third sex citizens who were attracted to one other and married each other were considered to engage in *parigraha*.

“There were eight different types of marriage according to the Vedic system, and the homosexual marriage that occurred between gay males or lesbians was classified

under the *Gandharva* or celestial variety. This type of marriage was not recommended for members of the Brahmana community but was often practiced by heterosexual men and women belonging to the other classes. The *Gandharva* marriage is defined as a union of love and cohabitation, recognized under common law, but without the need of parental consent or religious ceremony.” (*Kamasutra*, 2.9.36, Danielou)

iii. Transgenders (*Shandha*)

The Sanskrit word '*Shandha*' refers to men who act like women (the word '*shandhi*' similarly applies to women). Although it is used for many types of third gender people, it is most commonly applied for people with transgender identity. Male to female would identify and live as women whereas female to male transgenders would identify and live as men.

Although there are no evidences of the same, it is possible that in ancient India, male to female transgenders may have sometimes castrated themselves to become feminized. However, since self-mutilation is discouraged in ancient Indian texts, it is likely that men of the third sex would tie their genitals tightly against the groin with a *kaupina* (loincloth). Similarly, female to male transgenders would have strapped their breasts tightly against their torsos (Prabhupada, 1987, 53).

Transgender people of the third sex were allowed to live openly in accordance to their gender identity, by ancient Indian culture. This is demonstrated in the Mahabharata story of Brihannala, the transgender form of Arjuna (see Chapter Four). Castration was not a common or accepted practice in ancient India and mutilation of the body was highly discouraged and considered to be in the mode of darkness (Nanda, 1999, 22).

iv. Intersex (*Napumsa*)

The word '*Napumsa*' refers to any nonreproductive person of the third sex. However, it is mainly used for people with ambiguous genitalia. They could be heterosexual, homosexual, sexually ambiguous in nature and their degree of impotence would vary greatly. Those born without proper genitalia were called '*nisarga*' in Sanskrit and were believed to have physical conditions that is today called intersexuality. According to ancient India texts, people were born this way due to their past sinful activities (Subramaniam, 1995, 21). In spite of their *napumsaka* status, these people

were accepted by society. They typically lived according to their nature within the larger third gender community and shared similar roles.

v. Bisexuals (*Kami*)

The *Kamasutra* describes all kinds of heterosexual and homosexual behaviour between men and women spanning a major portion of the text. Within these chapters, bisexuality is occasionally mentioned. In ancient Indian times, bisexuality was considered to be more of a variation of men and women than as a category of the third sex. Since bisexuals would engage in the acts of procreation, they were not considered to be a part of the *napumsa* nature of the third sex. The Sanskrit word 'Kami' is used for people who are attracted to both men and women and who engage in homosexual activities for reasons other than natural attraction. Those who engage in both heterosexual as well as homosexual behaviour are known as '*Paksha*' in Sanskrit.

There are various chapters discussed in the *Kamasutra* pertaining to bisexuals. These pertain to men in the company of lesbians, men who visit transsexuals working as prostitutes, transsexuals within the king's harem, women of the harem satisfying themselves in the king's absence, and male servants who engage in homosexual activities in their youth and later get inclined towards women (Danielou, 1994, 300). They are also described in the *Srimad Bhagavatam* in the chapter describing heavenly realms situated below the earth.

It is to be understood that the sexual behaviours described in the *Kamasutra* are intended only for the citizens pursuing worldly pleasures. They are not for those engaged in the quest for the attainment of moksha or liberation. For people who are on the path of moksha, only celibacy is prescribed, even within marriage, and that is considered to be the highest standard of conduct for humans. Sexual behaviour, as recorded in the *Kamasutra*, varies from place to place. *Adhorata* (anal intercourse) for instance while is acknowledged to be practiced by all three sexes, it is not recommended for any of them, including for members of the third sex. Homosexual men who take the submissive role in anal sex are known as '*kumbhika*' in Sanskrit (Danielou, 1994, 157).

There are no verses even in the Dharma Shastras that specifically prohibit sexual behaviour among people of the third sex. Two verses in the Dharma Shastras admonish sexual intercourse among men (*pums-prakriti*). The atonement is a ritual

bathing applicable only for Brahmanas or those of the twice-born class (belonging to one of the three higher castes).

“(Manusmriti 11.175) Striking a brahmana, smelling obnoxious items such as liquor, cheating, and engaging in intercourse with a male are declared to cause the loss of caste. (Manusmriti 11.68) This loss of caste was not permanent since it could be atoned for, but it is generally accepted that unmarried brahmanas should always practice celibacy. Even married brahmanas were discouraged from having any sexual contact with their wives unless specifically engaged to produce a child in accordance with the garbhadhana-samskar process.” (Buhler, 1886, 32)

There are no laws in the Dharma Shastras banning acts between women except for two. These laws prohibit the violation of young, unmarried girls (aged eight to twelve) (Buhler, 1886, 344). Comparatively minor fines are issued as punishments for homosexual acts committed by young, unmarried girls or by twice-born males. The fines for women and girls for four times lesser than the fines for men (Swidler, 1993, 54).

There are other chapters discussing the behaviours pertaining to members of the third sex in the Dharma Shastras. These include—(i) their excusal from ancestral worship and oblations (shraddha), (ii) their omission from family inheritance (unless they had progeny), (iii) the recommendation that they should avoid offering food into the sacrificial fire. (iv) and, that ritualistic priests (*smarta-brahmanas*) shall not partake of such offerings (Buhler, 1886, 437; Olivelle, 2003, 302). These commands stem from the notion that people belonging to the third sex did not appease their forefathers and ancestral Gods by procreating, and they were therefore treated as ascetics. Fire sacrifices and other ritualistic ceremonies were mostly intended for householders and not for people of the neutral gender. In a verse from the Mahabharata, Shiva explains to Parvati why some men are born with severe physical handicaps such as blindness, chronic illnesses or, without proper sexual organs.

“(Mahabharata 13.145.52) A similar verse from the Narada Purana states that first-gender males who have intercourse in non-wombs (ayoni) take their next births as neuters after suffering in hell. The idea is that heterosexual males (pums, purusa) have the prescribed duty in life to marry women and produce offspring, and any neglect of this duty is said to incur sin. This is not, however, the duty of men belonging to the

third sex (napums) because they are impotent with women by nature and therefore not expected to procreate. The Narada-smṛiti (12.15) specifically states that homosexual men...should not be married to women. Procreation was not their prescribed duty or “dharma” under Vedic scriptural law.” (Subramaniam, 1995, 136)

II. Queer Deities in Ancient Indian Literature

Ancient Indian literature consists of many descriptions of saints, demigods, and even Gods like Krishna or Shiva transcending gender norms and manifesting multiple combinations of sex and gender. In Hinduism, God is recognised as untethered by any gender restrictions such as when Krishna during his *raas-leelas* manifested into innumerable types of forms.

The various types of Gods, and demigods who manifest these gender variations are—

- i. Deities that are hermaphrodite (half man and half woman)
- ii. Deities that manifest in all the three genders
- iii. Male deities who become female and vice versa
- iv. Male deities with female temperament and vice versa
- v. Deities born from two males or from two females
- vi. Deities born from a single male or a single female
- vii. Deities who avoid the opposite sex
- viii. Deities with primary companions of the same gender

All such examples depict the remarkable amount of gender variance found within Hinduism. In India, these deities are worshipped with great reverence and devotion by people of the third sex. In traditional Hinduism, due to their combined masculine and feminine natures, such deities are considered to be auspicious symbols of peace, good fortune, and culture.

i. Ardhanarisvara

Ardhanarisvara is perhaps the most popular and renowned hermaphrodite deity in Hinduism. One half of the deity is Shiva, and the other half is his wife, Parvati. The image of the deity is divided in the middle with one female breast, one male breast, female hips, male hips, and so on. The male side is represented through masculine features of Shiva whereas the female side has Parvati’s voluptuous and slender feminine features. The clothing and ornaments on each side of the deity are also

usually representative of their respective masculine and feminine sides. The oldest known sculpture of Ardhanarisvara is located in Mathura and dates to the first century AD.

The origin story of Ardhanarisvara differs from text to text. In the *Brahmanda Purana*, it is stated that Shiva assumed his Ardhanarisvara form after worshipping Shakti through yoga and meditation (*Brahmanda Purana*, 1958, 249). The *Kurma Purana* states that when Shiva appeared in a fierce half-male, half-female form when he was created from Brahma's anger at the beginning of creation. Brahma requested the form to split into two and thus the form divided himself into Shiva and Parvati (*Kurma Purana*, 1951, 65).

The form Ardhanarisvara embodies the fusion of male and female principles and is believed to represent all duality in nature such as masculine and feminine, light and darkness, impotence and fertility, indifference and compassion, and so on. The image of Ardhanarisvara is often worshipped for blessings in fertility, marriage, progeny, and longevity. Temples of this form exist throughout India and is widely worshipped by people of the third sex. Large festivals are also held on the *Shivratri* Day in the month of *Falgun* of the Hindu Calendar (February-March).

ii. Arjuna

In ancient Indian narratives, Arjuna manifests all three genders—male, female, and transgender. He is most renowned in his male form as the heroic warrior in the Mahabharata, the disciple of Krishna in the Bhagavat Gita, and as the husband of Draupadi. He is considered to be a dear friend and disciple to Krishna. Krishna and Arjuna became instant companions and spent many years together in deep friendship. A detailed exploration of the friendship between Krishna and Arjuna is given in chapter four. As inseparable friends, Arjuna and Krishna are said to be similar to the Vedic sages, Nara and Narayana.

In a lesser-known narrative of the *Padma Purana*, Arjuna transformed into a beautiful cowherd maiden named Arjuni. The *Padma Purana* is a Vaishnava text dedicated to the worship of Krishna. The Krishna mentioned in the text is of medieval Vaishnavism whose *raas-leela* with Radha and her friends signifies the reunion of the divine with the human spirit. However, the appearance of Arjuna in the *Padma Purana* brings about a rare coexistence of Krishna of the Puranas and Krishna of the

Mahabharata. Arjuna's appearance in the *Padma Purana* usually goes unnoticed by most scholars due to its aberrant nature (Goldman, 1993, 374-401).

The story of Arjuna and Arjuni is narrated by Sanatkumara to Krishna's friend Uddhava. The story ends with repeated injunctions by Krishna to Arjuna and by Sanatkumara to Uddhava to not let out the secret of the story. The following story related the similar experience of Narada, the divine sage, who was also transformed into a woman and sported with Krishna for a year. The sage also told the other sages about keeping his story a secret like guarding a mother's secret (Kidwai and Vanita, 2000, 90-91). The text also states that whoever reads or knows of the secret shall obtain Krishna. It appears that Vaishnava devotees were anxious to guard their secret text from anti-Vaishnavites for fear of being misinterpreted as licentious.

After Arjuna constantly expresses a desire to be privy to Krishna's *raas-leela*, but to not forget about it later, Krishna finally agrees on a condition. He instructs Arjuna to bathe in the sacred waters of a lake wherefrom he would arise as a beautiful maiden. This way while Arjuna's body shall be converted to that of a woman who can attend the female-only *raas-leela*, his mind shall remain to be that of a man. Arjuna does so and arises as Arjuni. He worships Radha and is then given permission to enter the *raas-leela* that is to be attended by women (*gopis*) only. However, upon seeing Krishna's profound form in the centre of the *raas-leela*, Arjuni becomes overcome with love and faints. Seeing her overcome with desire, Krishna leads Arjuni into the forest where he sports with her secretly and at will. Afterwards, Krishna returns Arjuni to the lake where he bathes again and regains his male form, Arjuna, satisfied of having fulfilled his desires (*MahaPadma Purana*, 1984, 1983).

Arjuna's transformation into Arjuni in order to fulfil his desire to know the secret of Krishna constitutes a medieval reading of the Mahabharata. In the Mahabharata, Arjuna's love for Krishna is expressed through '*sakhya*' or loving companionship. In medieval Vaishnava texts, such as the Padma Purana, '*madhurya*' or erotic love takes the dominant form of devotion (Kidwai and Vanita, 2000, 92-93).

"[Arjuna asks Krishna about the secret of his divine sport and how it can be witnessed. Krishna says Arjuna should not desire to witness it. Arjuna falls on the ground in despair. Krishna raises him lovingly in his arms and tells him that he will experience it if he worships the Goddess, Tripurasundari. Arjuna does so and is

granted a sight of Krishna's rasaleela, or dance of love. Having seen the "great secret," Arjuna is overcome with love and loses consciousness.] 5.74.60

The Goddess said: "After taking a bath in this lake, go to the eastern one, and having bathed in its waters, fulfill your desire." She disappeared as soon as Partha [Arjuna], on hearing her words, plunged into the lake which was tinged with pollen from white, red, and blue lotuses, as well as lotuses that bloomed in the moonlight, whose waters were fragrant with drops of honey, which were agitated with the sound of swans, whose banks were decorated with jewels, and which rippled in a gentle breeze. Emerging from the water, and looking all around, the one with the charming smile was confused. She found herself with an incomparable, pure, radiant form emanating golden rays, with the sparkle of youth and a face like the autumn moon. Her hair was dark, curly, and shining with jewels, the rays of an auspicious vermilion mark glowed on her forehead. Her raised, creeperlike eyebrows eclipsed the bows of the God of love. Her playful eyes were like dark clouds; her cheeks shone with the luster of her jeweled earrings. Her wonderful arms resembled delicate lotus stalks; her exquisite hands seemed to have robbed the autumn lotuses of their beauty. A skillfully crafted band of gold adorned her waist, her hips shone with a tinkling girdle. Her vulva was covered with shining cloth, her lotuslike feet were adorned with tinkling, jewel-studded anklets. She possessed all the skills in the art of love and all good qualities, besides being adorned with every kind of ornament. This epitome of beauty looked at herself in wonder. She had forgotten everything about her previous body owing to the illusion created by the beloved of the cowherd women. She stood there, bewildered, not knowing what to do. (74)

[Arjuni meets the cowherd women, who give her a bath and help her to worship the Goddess Radhika.]

135. She worshiped the Goddess whose limbs shone with molten gold, who was adorned with all kinds of ornaments, whose form and beauty were marvelous, who was pleased and could grant boons.

144. Then the Goddess, the granter of boons, who was compassionate toward her devotees, spoke. She said: "The words of my female friend are true. You are my dear friend. Get up and come with me, I will fulfill your desire." Hearing the words of the

Goddess, which were what her heart desired, Arjuni's hair stood on end, her eyes filled with tears, and she fell at the Goddess's feet. (146)

162. Then the lord, the son of Yashoda, pleased with [her] devotion, smiled, glanced at the Goddess Radhika and said: "Bring her here quickly." Thus commanded, the Goddess sent her friend Sharada, who brought her [Arjuni] before the playful one. She, on coming before the lord Krishna, was overwhelmed with love and, wonderstruck by all that she saw, fell on the golden floor. She raised herself with difficulty and slowly opened her eyes. She broke into a sweat, her hair stood on end, and she trembled. She saw that the place was wonderful and charming.

171. ... It was enchanting with flowers of all seasons. Their fragrance was more powerful than that of the aloe. Showers of honeydrops made it charmingly cool. ... It resounded with the calls of cuckoos, pigeons, female parrots, and other birds hidden amongst the leaves. The dance of intoxicated peacocks heightened passion. It glowed darkly like collyrium produced from nectar. She saw Krishna whose shiny, dark, curly, fragrant hair was tied with the finest plume of an intoxicated peacock. His ear ornament of flowers attracted swarms of bees, his cheeks shone like mirrors, bright with beelike locks of hair. His expansive forehead was decorated with a lovely auspicious mark. His nose resembled the flower of sesame or the beak of the king of birds. His beautiful smiling lips, red like the bimba fruit, inflamed desire. He was charming on account of his necklace, which resembled a wildflower. His broad shoulders were covered with a garland of the divine tree, and attracted thousands of female bees His beautiful waist resembled that of a lion, and his navel was very deep. His knees were like a good tree, rounded, and not too far apart. He was adorned with excellent ornaments-bracelets, armlets and anklets. His penis was covered with a part of his yellow garments. His beaury and charm excelled that of a choir of love Gods. Enchanting were the charming melodies produced by his flute. He enchanted the three worlds and immersed them in the ocean of happiness. His every limb seemed to be that of the God of love, satiated with the pleasure of rasa.

189. On seeing Radhika humbly offering a betel leaf to the one with the charming smile, who seemed to be to her left, Arjuniya was overcome with desire. Seeing her in that state, the all-knowing Hrishikesa [Krishna] took her hand and indulged in all the sports in the forest. The great lord sported with her secretly, at will. Then putting his

arm on her shoulder, and coming to Sharada, he said: "Quickly bathe this slender, gently smiling lady, who is exhausted with play, in the western lake." The Goddess Sharada took her to the western lake and said: "Bathe here," and the tired one did as she was told. She who entered the water was transformed once again into Arjuna, and rose at the spot where the lord of the Gods and of Vaikuntha stood. Krishna, seeing that Arjuna was depressed and heartbroken, touched him with his magic hand, so that he became aware of his nature. Shri Krishna said: "O Dhananjaya, I bless you, my dear [male] friend. There is none equal to you in the three worlds, as you know my secret. O Arjuna, you will curse me if you talk to anyone about the secret which you wanted to know and have experienced." (198) (*MahaPadma Puranam*, 1984, 1985)

iii. Ayyappa

The worship of Ayyappa, also known as Hariharaputra or Manikantha is very popular among the third sex of India. As described in various ancient Indian narratives, Ayyappa is the child of two male deities—Shiva and Vishnu. There are various narratives surrounding the birth of Ayyappa. When Shiva viewed Mohini's (Vishnu's female form) exquisite form, he was overcome with desire for her. He started chasing her, and while doing so spilled his seed on the ground. The earth Goddess not wanting to disrespect Shiva's seed, stored it in her womb beneath the soil. Years later, Ayyappa appeared on the banks of the river Pampa with a jewelled bell around his neck (thus his name Manikantha) and was discovered by the childless king of Pantalamp, Rajashekhara. In some narratives, instead of the earth Goddess accepting Shiva's seed, Mohini catches the seed in her palm and Ayyappa emerges from the thighs of Mohini (as being a man in a woman's form, she did not possess a womb). Embarrassed she leaves the child with the earth Goddess and runs away.

"8.8.41--46 Shuka said, "Meanwhile, the supreme lord Vishnu, the knower of all kinds of strategies, took the virtually indescribable form of an exceedingly wonderful woman. This form was a pleasure to behold. Its color was that of the blue lotus; all the limbs were beautiful; the ears and earrings were symmetrical; the face had beautiful cheeks and a shapely nose. The waist was slender, borne down by the weight of breasts heavy with the onset of youth. The eyes seemed to be perturbed by the hum of bees which were attracted by the fragrance of the mouth. A garland of full-blown

jasmine adorned the mass of hair. The beautiful neck was adorned with a necklace and the lovely arms with armlets. "Covered with a shining cloth, the island-like part between the hips appeared beautiful. The sound of tinkling anklets accompanied the movement of the feet. The hearts of the leaders of the demons were inflamed with passion in a moment on account of the shy smiles, the arching of the eyebrows, and the playful glances."

[The enchanting Mohini distracts the demons into giving the jar of nectar to the Gods. The God Shiva, who is not present on this occasion, hears an account of the incident and is curious to see this unusual form of Vishnu so, accompanied by his wife Parvati, he goes to pay him a visit.]

Shiva said, "I have seen the incarnations you assumed while playing with the three energies [Purity, Heat and Lassitude, of which the universe is composed]. I long to see the womanly body you adopted. We have come because we are very curious to see that form which deluded the demons and enabled the Gods to drink the nectar."

Shuka said: this request of the trident-bearing God, the lord Vishnu laughed and replied to the lord of mountains with words full of deep meaning."

The lord said: "When the jar of nectar had gone into the hands of the demons I dressed as a woman in order to arouse the curiosity of the demons and accomplish the task of the Gods, best of the Gods, as you are so eager, I will show you that form which arouses desire, and which is highly valued by passionate men."

Shuka said: "Speaking thus, the lord immediately disappeared. Shiva waited there with Uma [Parvati], looking for him in all directions. Then, in a garden with many-colored flowers and trees with red leaves, he saw a beautiful woman. She was playing with a ball. She wore a girdle, and a beautiful cloth covered her lower parts.

"It seemed as if her waist would collapse with the weight of her heavy breasts which trembled as she rose and bent with the ball, as well as with the weight of her necklaces and hips, as her tender leaflike feet went from place to place. The pupils of her large eyes anxiously followed the movements of the ball in various directions. Her face, framed with her dark flowing hair, looked beautiful, while her cheeks shone with the radiance of her earrings. She was tying her fine cloth, which had come loose, and

tidying her dishevelled hair with her beautiful left hand while hitting the ball with her other hand. She enchanted the entire world with her powers of illusion.

"On seeing her playing with the ball, smiling shyly, glancing at him, the God, gazing at the woman and being looked at in return by her, forgot himself as well as Uma [Parvati, his wife] and his attendants. The ball slipped from her hand and rolled away. She followed it while a gust of wind blew off her cloth and girdle. The lord Shiva stood staring.

"Seeing that beautiful charming woman who tried to attract him with her eyes, Shiva fixed his heart on her. Being deprived of his wisdom by her, completely oblivious of discernment, overwhelmed with passion, and quite shameless, he approached her even as Bhavani [Parvati] looked on.

"Undressed as she was, she seemed to be very shy as he came to her. Laughing, she went behind a tree but did not stay still. The lord, his senses out of control, overpowered by desire, followed her as a lordly elephant would a she-elephant. Chasing her, he caught the unwilling woman, pulled her by the hair, and held her in his arms. The lord held her in a close embrace, just as an elephant holds a she-elephant. She struggled in his grasp, and her hair was dishevelled.

"Freeing herself from the arms of the bull-like God, she, the illusion created by the God, ran swiftly, her heavy hips swaying. Completely vanquished by the enemy, passion, the famed Shiva followed the footsteps of the woman who had been created by Vishnu of miraculous exploits.

"While pursuing her, his semen, of unfailing power, fell, just as that of a prize bull chasing a fertile cow, or a lordly elephant a fertile she-elephant. O king, wherever the semen of the great one fell to the earth, there were fields of silver and gold. Hara [Shiva] pursued her over rivers, lakes, mountains, forests, gardens, and the abodes of sages.

"When his semen was completely drained, O best of kings, he realized that he was exhausted by the illusion of the God, and he recovered. It is said that, realizing the greatness of his own, the main temple of Ayyappa at Sabarisoul and of the universal soul, he was not surprised at what had been done by the lord of unknowable power.

"Vishnu was very pleased to see that he was neither remorseful nor embarrassed. He resumed his own masculine body."

Shuka said: "O king, having been honored by an embrace from the lord who bears the mark of Shri Vatsa, Shiva paid his respects, circumambulated him, and returned home with his attendants." (*Bhagvata Mahapuranam*, 1987, 1045-1046)

The child grew up to become a renowned warrior. In some versions, he kills a demon. In other versions, he gathers an army and fights bandits who are ravaging the countryside. One of them is the Muslim pirate Vavar. Defeated, Vavar joins forces with Ayyappa and becomes a close friend of his. The Ayyappa tradition incorporates Vavar as the inseparable companion of the God, symbolising a Hindu-Muslim friendship. The main temple of Ayyappa at Sabarimala, believed to have been constructed by Ayyappa's foster father before the latter ascended to heaven, has a shrine for Vavar. All pilgrims are supposed to carry an offering of pepper for Vavar along with other offerings for Ayyappa. Pepper, perhaps, signified that Arab traders like Vavar had come to the Malabar coast in search of pepper and other spices. Vavar is represented in this shrine through a sword. Vavar is also a part of Ayyappa's rituals in other ways. There are several songs in his praise and dance dramas performed by devotees including a dance performed by two men representing Ayyappa and Vavar. One carries a knife and the other carries a sickle. Ayyappa is believed to have instructed his father to build the shrine for Vavar saying 'Consider Vavar as myself'—a line which is reminiscent of Krishna's many statements for Arjuna in the Mahabharata (a detailed description of Arjuna and Krishna's friendship is given in chapter four).

This closeness with Vavar is enacted in the context of celibacy. Ayyappa had taken a vow of celibacy and refused the marriage proposal made to him by Leela. Leela had been imprisoned in a monstrous buffalo form, Mahishi. Ayyappa had freed her from the curse by killing the buffalo. Ayyappa agreed to let Leela live as his companion and his father to build a shrine for her as well. Thus, Ayyappa temples also have a shrine for her in the form of the Goddess Mallikapurathamma. Her shrine stands to the left of Ayyappa's and Vavar's to the right. The image of Ayyappa riding a tiger and killing a buffalo demon is reminiscent of the image of Shakti as Durga, hinting at Ayyappa having the Goddess's powers or himself having feminine energies.

Many students of medieval Europe such as John Boswell, Janice Raymond, and Bernadette Brooten have pointed out that in societies where arranged marriages were prevalent and parenthood was near universal, a religious vow of celibacy was almost the only means through which a person could refuse heterosexuality and choose to live in a same-sex community (Kidwai and Vanita, 2000, 96). In ancient Indian literature, this desire to refuse heterosexuality and adopt celibacy was expressed through the person retreating into the forest or retiring to an ashram. Both epic and Puranic texts construct the forest simultaneously as a space of celibacy, mystery, and magic where sex change as in the case of Shikhandi (chapter four), or miraculous birth, illicit types of sexuality occur. It is thus significant that Ayyappa is characterised as a forest dweller. The Sabarimala temple is situated on a mountain in the midst of dense forests and the journey to it that is conducted barefoot leads the pilgrim away from the amenities of domestic life and civilisation and propels him into the forest where he may encounter wild beasts, bandits, and other hardships. The pilgrim performs this difficult journey with other pilgrims of the same sex to reach a temple where the God is represented, unlike other Hindu Gods, not with his consort but with his celibate friends.

Female presence is also incorporated in the temple through the shrine of Leela who also took a vow of celibacy after Ayyappa refused her proposal of marriage. Ayyappa is believed to have told her that he would marry her when devotees stop coming to the temple. Therefore, each devotee who goes to the temple brings a small wooden arrow. The devotees, on their way to the temple, then stick the arrows in a large *peepal* tree to mark their presence. Thus, the devotees actively participate in protecting the God's celibacy. Their presence is imperative for him to remain celibate. After the pilgrimage season is over, there is a ritual where the Goddess's image, decked in bridal finery, is carried in a procession to the tree. The bridal procession has to return disappointed after witnessing the evidence of the presence Ayyappa's devotees in the form of arrows stuck to the tree, thus keeping Ayyappa celibate. Observers cite that while this ritual causes amused delight among some of the spectators, others choose to sympathise with the Goddess (Sekhar, 1992, 68; Thomas, 1973, 46-47).

The all-male pilgrimage to Sabarimala which excludes women of reproductive age can be seen as providing temporary freedom to men from the burden of compulsory heterosexuality and reproduction. It is interesting to note that each devotee who takes

the vow to embark on the journey to Sabarimala is himself addressed as Ayyappa, thus, temporarily sharing the freedom and bliss of the God's celibate state. This relief, however, is only temporary and not meant as a threat to the institution of marriage, nor does it intend to make the devotee chose between marriage and asceticism. It allows the devotee to indulge in the best of both worlds.

iv. Bhagiratha

As narrated in the *Bhagavata Purana*, Bhagiratha is renowned as he brought the celestial river, Ganges down to earth. Although his forefathers had attempted the feat before unsuccessfully, pleased by the severe austerities performed by Bhagiratha, Ganga allowed herself to descend to earth. This text is derived from the ancient medical text *Susbruta Sambita*, which declares that a child born to two women will have no bones (Kidwai and Vanita, 2000, 100-101).

Bhagiratha is known as the son of King Dilipa. King Dilipa was the king of Ayodhya and had no sons. He left his kingdom to perform austerities to summon the Ganges and also to obtain a son. However, he died before accomplishing either. This worried the Gods as the Sun dynasty, the dynasty in which Vishnu would be reincarnated, was now left without an heir. Moved by their pleas, Shiva visited the widows of King Dilipa and instructed the childless widows to make love to each other until one of them, through divine powers, conceives a child. The widows executed the deed and one of them soon conceived a child. However, that child was born as a lump of flesh without any features or bones. They decided to leave the lump of flesh on the banks of the Sarayu River where soon after, Sage Astavakra, a renowned rishi, found it and granted the child bones and features. He also blessed the child to be powerful and good looking. He then went to the palace and returned the child to the queens, naming him Bhagiratha (the one who is born of two vulvas). Thus, the dynasty of King Dilipa continued with Bhagiratha eventually bringing the Ganges River to earth.

“Dilipa ruled like Indra, the king of the Gods, but was sad as he did not have a son. Leaving behind his two wives in the city of Ayodhya, Dilipa went in search of the Ganga. He performed a severe penance for countless years, living on water and fasting, but he neither found the Ganga nor became free of his sorrow. King Dilipa died and went to Brahma's world. On his death the city of Ayodhya was kingless. In heaven, Brahma and Indra were worried: "We have heard that Vishnu will be born in

the family of the sun. How will this be possible if the line comes to an end?" All the Gods consulted together and decided to send the three-eyed God, Shiva, to Ayodhya. Riding his bull, Shiva went to Dilipa's two queens and said to them: "By my blessings, one of you will have a son." Hearing Shiva's words, the two women said: "We are widows, how can we have a child?" Shankara replied: "You two have intercourse with one another. By my blessings one of you will have a lovely child." Having bestowed this boon, the God who destroys the three worlds went his way.

The two wives of Dilipa took a bath. They lived together in extreme love. After some days, one of them menstruated. Both of them knew one another's intentions and enjoyed love play, and one of them conceived.

Ten months passed; it was time for the birth. The child emerged as a lump of flesh. Both of them cried with the son in their lap: "Why did the three-eyed one bless us with such a son? He has no bones, he is a lump of flesh, he cannot move about. Seeing him, the whole world will laugh at us." Weeping, they put him in a basket and went to the bank of the river Sarayu to throw him into the water.

The sage Vashistha saw them and understood everything through his powers of meditation. He said: "Leave the child on the road. Someone will have compassion on him, seeing him helpless."

The two of them left their son on the road and went home. Just then the sage Ashtavakra came along for his bath. Bent at eight places, the sage walked with great difficulty. Seeing the child from a distance, Ashtavakra thought: "If you are mimicking me in order to make fun of me, may your body be destroyed by my curse. If, however, your body is naturally as it appears, may you, by my blessing, become like Madanmohan, the God of erotic love."

Ashtavakra was as powerful as Vishnu, so neither his curses nor his blessings failed to bear fruit. He was a sage endowed with great and miraculous powers. The prince stood up. Through his powers of meditation, the sage came to know that this son of Dilipa was an auspicious one, a great man.

The sage called the two queens, who took their son and returned home, delighted. The sage came too and performed all the sacred rituals. Because he was born of two

vulvas (bhagas) he was named Bhagiratha. The great poet Krittivasa is a recognized scholar. In this Adi Kanda he sings of the birth of Bhagiratha.

When the child was five years old, he was sent to study with the sage Vashistha. One day, when the children were quarrelling, another child called him a bastard. The child was deeply hurt and did not return home. His mother grew worried and went in search of him. She wiped his tears and asked what ailed him. He told her that he had been insulted, and asked to what caste he belonged and whose son he was. His mother then told him the truth that he was named Bhagiratha because he was born through divine blessing, of two bhagas, or vulvas, that his father had died before his conception, while trying to bring down Ganga, and that he belonged to the race of the sun, in the city of Ayodhya. At this, Bhagiratha laughed with pleasure and said that if he wished, he would definitely be able to bring the Goddess Ganga down. He declared his intention to set out the very next day to perform austerities. At this, his mothers grew anxious and tried to dissuade him, but he disregarded them, took Guru Vashistha's blessing and set out.” (*Sachitra Krittivasi Saptakanda Ramayana*, 1914, 238).

v. Harihara

Harihara is a form in which the two male deities, Vishnu and Shiva are fused together. Similar to the Ardhanarisvara form, there are various narratives of the origin of Harihara. The most popular narrative believes that Harihara appeared when Shiva embraced Vishnu as Mohini. Similar to the Ardhanarisvara form, the right side of Harihara is Shiva (the male side) and the left side is Vishnu (the female side). In traditional images of the deity, Shiva can be seen carrying a trident with matted hair and accompanied by Nandi (his bull carrier) or a *gana* (a dwarf-like attendant). Vishnu can be seen carrying a *cakra*, wearing a crown and being accompanied by an attendant.

Although not much is known about his unique form of Harihara, the form is highly revered and worshipped. The form is most popularly known as the birthparents of Hariharaputra, Ayyappa and symbolised the deep relationship between Vishnu and Shiva bringing harmony between Vaishnavite and Shaivite traditions.

vi. Iravan

Iravan, known as Aravan in Tamil Nadu, is the son of Arjuna and the Naga princess, Uloopi. In the Mahabharata, Iravan was a hero during the battle of Kurukshetra, and is believed to have served Krishna and the Pandavas by slaying many of Duryodhana's soldiers. Over the past few decades, the worship of Iravan has become increasingly popular.

Thousands of *aravanis* (cross-dressed devotees of Iravan also known as *ali*) and other people belonging to the queer community gather on the Tuesday before the full-moon day of *Vaishaka* to celebrate a six-day long festival dedicated to Iravan. The celebrations are based on the tale of the Mahabharata where during the battle of Kurukshetra, Iravan gives himself up as a sacrifice to Goddess Kali to make sure the Pandavas win the war. However, he asks for three boons before he dies, one of which was to marry before death. Since no woman was willing to marry someone who was to be sacrificed the next day, Vishnu assumed his Mohini form and married him. The next day, Iravan was sacrificed and Mohini wept as his widow.

During the Koonthandavara festival, thousands of *aravanis* dress up as women and reenact the story of Iravan's life. They, like Mohini, mourn his death by wailing, beating their chests, breaking their bangles, and so on. In some temples, the Krishna deity is dressed in a white saree (a symbol of widowhood) on this day (Wilhelm, 2008, 137). Thus, Iravan is widely popular and revered among the third sex in India.

vii. Shiva

Shiva is considered to be the destroyer of the material cosmos and husband of Parvati (Shakti). As the destroyer, he is responsible for universal destruction and renowned as Nataraja or Lord of Dance. It is believed that when the time comes for the destruction of the universe, Shiva performs his cosmic dance and ends all creation.

In ancient Indian literature, there is a narrative about Shiva's transformation into the beautiful maiden known as Gopisvara. The narrative says that Shiva once desired to witness Krishna's *raas-leela* dance with the *gopis*. He performed severe austerities until Krishna's *yogamaya*, Purnamasi, appeared before him. He prayed to her to witness the dance and she agreed, telling him to bathe in the waters of the Brahma-Kunda Pond. Shiva did so and emerged as a beautiful, cowherd maiden. He went to

where the *raas-leela* was taking place, hiding within a grove. Krishna and the *gopis*, however, sensed something different and stopped dancing. They searched the groves and found the unknown maiden. The *gopis* demanded to know her identity. Shiva, as the maiden, could not reveal his true identity to them, so they began slapping her. Perturbed, Shiva prayed to Purnamasi again who appeared and told the *gopis* to spare her. The *gopis* then accepted her and named her Gopisvara or the one who is controlled by *gopis*. Krishna who had seen this entire scene unfold then blessed Gopisvara to become the guard of his sacred *raas-leela* and ordained that henceforth no one would be able to enter his *raas-leela* without Gopisvara's sanction. From that day, Shiva's duty as Gopisvara was to guard Krishna's *raas-leela*. There is a temple of Gopisvara Mahadeva in Vrndavana, Uttar Pradesh.

“Verse 2.25.1:

एवं विचिन्त्य मनसा
शिवो वासुरिणा सह
तौ कृष्ण-दऱरुषुणार्थाय
जगमतुर् व्रज-मणुडलम्

*evaṃ vicintya manasā
śivo vāsuriṇā saha
tau kṛṣṇa-daṛṣṇāarthāya
jagmatur vraja-maṇḍalam*

English translation of verse 2.25.1:

Thinking in this way, Śiva and Asuri went to the circle of Vraja to see Lord Kṛṣṇa.

Verse 2.25.2:

दिव्य-द्रुम-लता-कुञ्ज-
तोलिका-पुञ्ज-शोभितम्
पश्यन्तौ तौ दिव्य-भूमिं
कालिन्दी-निकटे गतौ

*divya-druma-latā-kuñja-
tolikā-puñja-śobhitam
paśyantau tau divya-bhūmiṃ
kāliṇdī-nikaṭe gatau*

English translation of verse 2.25.2:

went.

Near the Yamunā they went to a splendid transcendental place filled with splendid groves of trees, vines, and archways.

Verse 2.25.3:

गोलोक-वासिन्यो नर्यो
वेत्र-हस्ता महा-बलाः
चक्रुर् बलात् तन्-निषेधं
मार्ग-स्था द्वार-पालिकाः

*goloka-vāsinyo naryo
vetra-hastā mahā-balāḥ
cakrur balāt tan-niṣedham
mārga-sthā dvāra-pālikāḥ*

English translation of verse 2.25.3:

Many very powerful, stick-wielding women of Goloka guarded the entrance.

Blocking the path, they and forbade them to enter.

Verse 2.25.4:

ताव् ऊचतुश् चागतौ स्वः
कृष्ण-दर्शन-लालसौ
ताव् आहुर् नृप-शार्दूल
मार्ग-स्था द्वार-पालिकाः

*tāv ūcatuś cāgatau svaḥ
kṛṣṇa-darśana-lālasau
tāv āhur nṛpa-śārdūla
mārga-sthā dvāra-pālikāḥ*

English translation of verse 2.25.4:

The two of them said, "Yearning to see Lord Kṛṣṇa, we have come here". O tiger of kings, as they blocked the path, the entrance-guards spoke to them.

Verse 2.25.5:

श्री-द्वार-पालिका ऊचुः
सर्वतो वृन्दकारण्यं

कोटिशः कोटिशो वयम्
रास-रक्षां सदा कुर्मो
न्यस्ता कृष्णेन भो द्विजौ

*śrī-dvāra-pālikā ūcuḥ
sarvato vṛndakāraṇyaṃ
koṭīśaḥ koṭīśo vayam
rāsa-rakṣāṃ sadā kurmo
nyastā kṛṣṇena bho dvijau*

English translation of verse 2.25.5:

The entrance guards said: There are many millions of millions of us everywhere in Vṛndāvana. Appointed by Lord Kṛṣṇa, we eternally guard the rāsa dance.

Verse 2.25.6:

एको ऽस्ति पुरुषः कृष्णो
निर्जने रास-मण्डले
अन्यो न याति रहसि
गोपी-यूथं विना क्वचित्

*eko 'sti puruṣaḥ kṛṣṇo
nirjane rāsa-maṇḍale
anyo na yāti rahasi
gopī-yūthaṃ vinā kvacit*

English translation of verse 2.25.6:

In this secluded rāsa-dance circle Kṛṣṇa is the only male. Except for Him there are only gopīs here.

Verse 2.25.7:

चेद् दिदृक्षु युवां तस्य
स्नानं मान-सरोवरे
कुरुतं तत्र गोपीत्वं
प्राप्याशु व्रजतं मुनी

*ced didṛkṣū yuvāṃ tasya
snānaṃ māna-sarovare
kurutaṃ tatra gopītvam
prāpyāśu vrajataṃ munī*

English translation of verse 2.25.7:

O sages, if you wish to see Lord Kṛṣṇa, then please bath in the Māna-sarovara lake. In that way you will become gopīs, and then you may enter.

Verse 2.25.8:

श्री-नारद उवाच
इत् उक्तौ तौ मुनि-शिवौ
स्नात्वा मान-सरोवरे
गोपीत्वं प्राप्य सहसा
जग्मतू रास-मण्डले

śrī-nārada uvāca
ity uktau tau muni-śivau
snātvā māna-sarovare
gopītvam prāpya sahasā
jagmatū rāsa-maṇḍale

English translation of verse 2.25.8:

Bathing in Māna-sarovara, and at once becoming gopīs, Lord Siva and Asuri Muni went to the circle of the rāsa dance.

Verse 2.25.9:

सौवर्ण-प्रखचित्-पद्म-
राग-भूमि-मनोहरे
माधवी-लतिका-वृन्दा-
कदम्बाच्छादिते शुभे

sauvarṇa-prakhacit-padma-
rāga-bhūmi-manohare
mādhavī-latikā-vṛndā-
kadambācchādite śubhe

English translation of verse 2.25.9:

In a beautiful place paved with gold and rubies, shaded by kadamba trees and flowering mādhavī vines, . . .

Verse 2.25.10:

वसन्त-चन्द्र-कौमुद्या
प्रदीप्ते सर्व-कौशले

यमुना-रत्न-सोपान-
तोलिकाभिर् विराजिते

*vasanta-candra-kaumudyā
pradīpte sarva-kauśale
yamunā-ratna-sopāna-
tolikābhir virājite*

English translation of verse 2.25.10:

. . . filled with all beauty, splendid with spring moonlight, glorious with arches and jewel stairways leading to the Yamunā, . . .

Verse 2.25.11:

मयूर-हंस-दत्यूह-
कोकिलैः कुजिते परे
यमुनानिल-नीलैजत्-
तरु-पल्लव-शोभिते

*mayūra-hamsa-datyūha-
kokilaiḥ kujite pare
yamunānila-nīlaijat-
taru-pallava-śobhite*

English translation of verse 2.25.11:

. . . filled with cooing peacocks, swans, datyūhas, and cuckoos, fanned by the Yamunā's breezes, beautiful with newly-blossoming trees, . . .

Verse 2.25.12:

सभा-मण्डप-वीथीभिः
प्राङ्गन-स्तम्भ-पङ्क्तिभिः
पतत्-पताकैर् दिव्याभैः
सौवर्णैः कलशैर् वृते

*sabhā-maṇḍapa-vīthībhiḥ
prāṅgana-stambha-paṅktibhiḥ
patat-patākair divyābhaiḥ
sauvarṇaiḥ kalaśair vrte*

English translation of verse 2.25.12:

. . . filled with meeting houses that had courtyards with rows of pillars, splendid fluttering flags, and golden domes, . . .

Verse 2.25.13:

श्वेतारुणैः पुष्प-सङ्घैः
पुष्प-मन्दिर-वर्त्मभिः
अलि-कोलाहलैर् व्यप्ते
वादित्र-मधुर-ध्वनौ

*śvetāruṇaiḥ puṣpa-saṅghaiḥ
puṣpa-mandira-vartmabhiḥ
ali-kolāhalair vyapte
vāditra-madhura-dhvanau*

English translation of verse 2.25.13:

. . . filled with flower-palaces of red and white blossoms, the buzzing of bees, and sweet sounds of musical instruments, . . .

Verse 2.25.14:

सहस्र-दल-पद्मानां
वायुना मन्द-गामिना
शीतलेन सु-पुण्येन
सर्वतः सुरभी-कृते

*sahasra-dala-padmānām
vāyunā manda-gāminā
śītalena su-puṇyena
sarvataḥ surabhī-kṛte*

English translation of verse 2.25.14:

. . . and fragrant with pure and cooling breezes carrying the scent of thousand-petal lotuses, . . .

Verses 2.25.15-20:

तस्मिन् निकुञ्जे श्री-कृष्णं
कोटि-चन्द्र-प्रकाशया
पद्मिन्या हंस-गामिन्या
राधया समलङ्कृतम्
स्त्री-रत्नैर् आवृतं शश्वद्
रास-मण्डल-मध्य-गम्
कोटि-मन्मथ-लावण्यं
श्यामसुन्दर-विग्रहम्
वंशी-धरं पीत-पटं

वेत्र-पाणिं मनोहरम्
 श्रीवत्साङ्गं कौस्तुभिनं
 वन-माला-विराजितम्
 कणन्-नूपुर-मञ्जीर-
 काञ्ची-केयूर-भूषितम्
 हार-कङ्कन-बालार्क-
 कुण्डल-द्वय-मण्डितम्
 कोटि-चन्द्र-प्रतीकाश-
 मौलिनं नन्द-नन्दनम्
 दान-दक्षैः कटाक्षैश् च
 हरन्तं योषितां मनः
 दूराद् अपश्यतं राजन्
 आसुरीशौ कृताञ्जली
 गोपी-जनानां सर्वेषां
 पश्यतां नृप-सत्तम
 नत्वा श्री-कृष्ण-पादाब्जं
 ऊचतुर् हर्ष-विह्वलौ

*tasmin nikuñje śrī-kr̥ṣṇam
 koṭi-candra-prakāśayā
 padminyā haṁsa-gāminyā
 rādhayā samalankṛtam
 strī-ratnair āvṛtam śaśvad
 rāsa-maṇḍala-madhya-gam
 koṭi-manmatha-lāvanyaṁ
 śyāmasundara-vigraham
 vaṁśī-dharaṁ pīta-paṭam
 vetra-pāṇiṁ manoharam
 śrīvatsāṅkaṁ kaustubhinaṁ
 vana-mālā-virājitam
 kvaṇan-nūpura-mañjīra-
 kāñcī-keyūra-bhūṣitam
 hāra-kaṅkana-bālārka-
 kuṇḍala-dvaya-maṇḍitam
 koṭi-candra-pratīkāśa-
 maulinaṁ nanda-nandanam
 dāna-dakṣaiḥ kaṭākṣaiś ca
 harantaṁ yoṣitāṁ manaḥ
 dūrād apaśyataṁ rājann
 āsurīśau kṛtāñjalī
 gopī-janānāṁ sarveṣāṁ
 paśyatāṁ nṛpa-sattama
 natvā śrī-kr̥ṣṇa-pādābjaṁ
 ūcatur harṣa-vihvalau*

English translation of verses 2.25.15-20:

. . . bowing down to the lotus feet of Lord Kṛṣṇa, who in that forest grove was splendid as ten million moons, who was decorated by lotuslike, swan-graceful Śrī Rādhā's company, who, surrounded by jewellike women, eternally stayed the middle of the rāsa-dance circle, who was handsome as ten million Kāmadevas, whose form was dark and handsome, who was dressed in yellow garments, who held a flute and stick in His hand, who bore the mark of Śrīvatsa, who was decorated with the Kaustubha gem, who was splendid with a forest garland, who was decorated with tinkling anklets, belt, and armllets, and with necklaces, bracelets, and earrings splendid as two rising suns, who wore a crown splendid as ten million suns, who with generous sidelong glances stole the gopīs' hearts, and whom the gopīs gazed at from afar, Lord Śiva and Asuri Muni, now overcome with happiness, spoke.

Verse 2.25.21:

द्वाव् ऊचतुः
कृष्ण कृष्ण महा-योगिन्
देव-देव जगत्-पते
पुण्डरीकाक्ष गोविन्द
गरुड-ध्वज ते नामः

*dvāv ūcatuḥ
kṛṣṇa kṛṣṇa mahā-yogin
deva-deva jagat-pate
puṇḍarīkākṣa govinda
garuḍa-dhvaja te nāmaḥ*

English translation of verse 2.25.21:

The two of them said: O Kṛṣṇa, O Kṛṣṇa, O great yogī, O master of the demigods, O Lord of the universes, O lotus-eyed one, O Govinda, O Lord who carries a flag with the emblem of Garuḍa, obeisances to You!

Verse 2.25.22:

जनार्दन जगन्नाथ
पद्मनाभ त्रिविक्रम
दामोदर हृषीकेश
वासुदेव नमो ऽस्तु ते

*janārdana jagannātha
padmanābha trivikrama
dāmodara hr̥ṣīkeśa
vāsudeva namo 'stu te*

English translation of verse 2.25.22:

O savior from miseries, O Lord of the universes, O lotus-naveled one, O Lord who took three steps, O Lord bound at the waist with a rope, O master of the senses, O son of King Vasudeva, obeisances to You!

Verse 2.25.23:

अद्यैव देव परिपूर्णतमस् तु साक्षाद्
भू-भूरि-भार-हरणाय सतां शुभाय
प्राप्तौ ऽसि नन्द-भवने परतः परस् त्वं
कृत्वा हि सर्व-निज-लोकम् अशेष-शून्यम्

*adyaiva deva paripūrṇatamas tu sāksād
bhū-bhūri-bhāra-haraṇāya satāṃ śubhāya
prāpto 'si nanda-bhavane parataḥ paras tvam
kṛtvā hi sarva-nija-lokam aśeṣa-śūnyam*

English translation of verse 2.25.23:

O Supreme Personality of Godhead, leaving all Your transcendental abodes and making them devoid of Your presence, You have now come to Nanda's home to remove the earth's great burden and to bring auspiciousness to Your devotees.

Verse 2.25.24:

अंशांशकांश-कलयाभिरुताभिरामं
आवेश-पूर्ण-निचयाभिर् अतीव युक्तः
विश्वं बिभर्षि रस-रासम् अलङ्करोषि
वृन्दावनं च परिपूर्णतमः स्वयं त्वम्

*aṃśāṃśakāṃśa-kalayābhirutābhirāmaṃ
āveśa-pūrṇa-nicayābhir atīva yuktaḥ
viśvaṃ bibharṣi rasa-rāsam alaṅkaroṣi
vṛndāvanaṃ ca paripūrṇatamaḥ svayaṃ tvam*

English translation of verse 2.25.24:

You are the original and perfect Supreme Personality of Godhead, glorious with incarnations that display a part, a part of a part, or a part of a part of a part of Your power. With Your many empowered incarnations You maintain the universe.

With the sweet rāsa dance You decorate the forest of Vṛndāvana.

Verse 2.25.25:

गोलोक-नाथ गिरिराज-पते परेश
वृन्दावनेश कृत-नित्य-विहार-लील
राधा-पते व्रज-वधू-जन-गीत-कीर्ते
गोविन्द गोकुल-पते किल ते जयो ऽस्तु

*goloka-nātha girirāja-pate pareśa
vṛndāvaneśa kṛta-nitya-vihāra-līla
rādhā-pate vraja-vadhū-jana-gīta-kīrte
govinda gokula-pate kila te jayo 'stu*

English translation of verse 2.25.25:

O master of Goloka, O master of the king of mountains. O supreme master, O master of Vṛndāvana, O enjoyer of eternal pastimes, O master of Rādhā, O master whose glories are sung by the girls of Vraja, O master of Gokula, O Govinda, all glories to You!

Verse 2.25.26:

श्रीमन्-निकुञ्ज-लतिका-कुसुमाकरस् त्वं
श्री-राधिका-हृदय-कण्ठ-विभूषणस् त्वम्
श्री-रास-मण्डल-पतिर् व्रज-मण्डलेशो ब्रह्माण्ड-मण्डल-मही-परिपालको ऽसि

*śrīman-nikuñja-latikā-kusumākaras tvam
śrī-rādhikā-hṛdaya-kaṅṭha-vibhūṣaṇas tvam
śrī-rāsa-maṇḍala-patir vraja-maṇḍaleśo brahmāṇḍa-maṇḍala-mahī-paripālako 'si*

English translation of verse 2.25.26:

You are decorated with beautiful flowers taken from Vṛndāvana's vines. You are the ornament Śrī Rādhā wears on Her neck and over Her heart. You are the master of the rāsa-dance circle. You are the master of the circle of Vraja. You are the protector of the circle of the universes.

Verse 2.25.27:

श्री-नारद उवाच
तदा प्रसन्नो भगवान्
राधया सहितो हरिः
मन्द-स्मितो मुनिं प्राह
मेघ-गम्भीरया गिरा

śrī-nārada uvāca
tadā prasanno bhagavān
rādhayā sahito hariḥ
manda-smito munim prāha
megha-gambhīrayā girā

English translation of verse 2.25.27:

Śrī Nārada said: Pleased and gently smiling as He stood by Śrī Rādhā's side, with words like thunder Lord Kṛṣṇa spoke to the sage.

Verse 2.25.28:

श्री-भगवान् उवाच
शष्टि-वर्ष-सहस्राणि
युवयोस् तपतोस् तपः
मद्-दर्शनं तेन जातं
सर्वतो नैरपेक्षयोः

śrī-bhagavān uvāca
śaṣṭi-varṣa-sahasrāṇi
yuvayos tapatos tapaḥ
mad-darśanaṁ tena jātaṁ
sarvato nairapekṣayoḥ

English translation of verse 2.25.28:

The Supreme Personality of Godhead said: Renouncing everything, the two of you performed austerities for sixty-thousand years in order to see Me.

Verse 2.25.29:

निष्किञ्चनो यो शान्तश् चा-
जात-शत्रुः स मत्-सखा
तस्माद् युवाभ्यां मनसा
त्रियताम् ईप्सितो वरः

niṣkiñcano yo śāntaś cā-
jāta-śatruḥ sa mat-sakhā
tasmād yuvābhyāṁ manasā
vriyatām īpsito varaḥ

English translation of verse 2.25.29:

You do not crave material wealth, you are peaceful, you do not think anyone your enemy, and you are my friends. Therefore, please choose a benediction.

Choose whatever your hearts desire.

Verse 2.25.30:

शिवासुरी ऊचतुः
नमो ऽस्तु भूमन् युवयोः पदाब्जे
सदैव वृन्दावन-मध्य-वास
न रोचते नो ऽन्यम् अतस् त्वद्-अङ्घ्रेर्
नमो युवाभ्यां हरि-राधिकाभ्याम्

*śivāsuri ūcatuḥ
namo 'stu bhūman yuvayoḥ padābje
sadaiva vṛndāvana-madhyā-vāsa
na rocate no 'nyam atas tvad-aṅghrer
namo yuvābhyāṃ hari-rādhikābhyām*

English translation of verse 2.25.30:

Lord Śiva and Asuri Muni said: O Lord who resides in Vṛndāvana, we eternally offer our obeisances to Your lotus feet. Nothing other than Your lotus feet gives us any happiness. O Śrī Śrī Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa, we offer our respectful obeisances to You!

Verse 2.25.31:

श्री-नारद उवाच
तथास्तु चोक्त्वा भगवान्
वृन्दारण्ये मनोहरे
कालिन्दी-निकटे राजन्
रास-मण्डल-मण्डिते
निकुञ्ज-पार्श्वे पुलिने
वंशीवट-समीपतः
शिवो ऽपि चासुरि-मुनिर्
नित्यं वासं चकार ह

*śrī-nārada uvāca
tathāstu coktvā bhagavān
vṛndāraṇye manohare
kāliṅdī-nikaṭe rājan
rāsa-maṇḍala-maṇḍite*

*nikuñja-pārsve puline
vaṁśīvaṭa-samīpataḥ
śivo 'pi cāsuri-munir
nityaṁ vāsaṁ cakāra ha*

English translation of verse 2.25.31:

The Lord then said, "So be it." From that moment Lord Śiva and Asuri Muni made their residence there, at Vaṁśīvaṭa, where the forest grove by the Yamunā's shore is decorated with the circle of the rāsa dance.

Verse 2.25.33:

अथ कृष्णो रास-लीलां
चक्रे पद्माकरे वने
पतत्-सुगन्धि-रजसि
गोपीभिर् भ्रमराकुले

*atha kṛṣṇo rāsa-līlāṁ
cakre padmākare vane
patat-sugandhi-rajasi
gopībhir bhramarākule*

English translation of verse 2.25.33:

Then Lord Śrī Kṛṣṇa enjoyed a rāsa dance with the gopīs in Padmākara forest, which was filled with buzzing bees and fragrant flower pollen.

Verse 2.25.34:

एवं षण्-मासिकी रत्रिः
कृता कृष्णेन मैथिल
गोपीनां रास-लीलायां
व्यतीता क्षणवत् सुखैः

*evaṁ ṣaṇ-māsikī ratriḥ
kṛtā kṛṣṇena maithila
gopīnāṁ rāsa-līlāyāṁ
vyatītā kṣaṇavat sukhaiḥ*

English translation of verse 2.25.34:

O king of Mithilā, although in truth it lasted for six months, the night Lord Kṛṣṇa enjoyed the rāsa dance with the gopīs seemed to Them only a single moment of great happiness when it was over.

Verse 2.25.35:

अरुणोदय-वेलायां
स्व-गृहान् व्रज-योषितः
यूथी-भूत्वा ययू राजन्
सर्वाः पूर्ण-मनोरथाः

*aruṇodaya-velāyāṃ
sva-grhān vraja-yoṣitaḥ
yūthī-bhūtvā yayū rājan
sarvāḥ pūrṇa-manorathāḥ*

English translation of verse 2.25.35:

At sunrise all the gopīs, their desires fulfilled, returned to their homes.

Verse 2.25.36:

श्री-नन्द-मन्दिरं साक्षात्
प्राययौ नन्द-नन्दनः
वृषभानु-पुरं प्रागाद्
वृषभानु-सुता त्वरम्

*śrī-nanda-mandiraṃ sākṣāt
prāyayau nanda-nandanah
vṛṣabhānu-puraṃ prāgād
vṛṣabhānu-sutā tvaram*

English translation of verse 2.25.36:

Lord Kṛṣṇa went to Nanda's palace and Śrī Rādhā hurried to King Vṛṣabhānu's palace.”

(*Garga Samhita*, Canto Two, Chapter 25, Goswami)

viii. Vallabhavardhana

Vallabhavardhana is a little-known form of Vishnu and Laxmi, like Shiva's form Ardhanarisvara. Similar to other deities, Vishnu manifests himself in all the three genders—male (Vishnu), female (Mohini), and third sex (Vallabhavardhana). The Vallabhavardhana form of Vishnu is divided in the middle with the right half represented by Vishnu and the left half by Laxmi. A popular image from Kashmir depicts Vallabhavardhana seated and manifesting an eight-armed form.

Vallabhavardhana (translated to half Vallabha or half Vishnu) is mentioned briefly in the Bhavishya Purana, but little is known about this form beyond this text.

ix. Virata—The Story of An Ally

King Virata was the ruler of the Matsya province in India around five thousand years ago. The Pandavas had chosen to hide in his kingdom in disguise during the thirteenth year of their exile. While others had dressed up for their respective characters, Arjuna was cursed to be a transgender person for the duration of the year (a detailed description of the story of Arjuna's curse is given in chapter four). Hence, Arjuna adorned himself in women's clothes and jewellery and visited Virata for shelter. Arjuna entered the palace with the gait of a broad-hipped woman, his long hair braided and adorned with flowers and jewellery. His glory shone even through his feminine appearance. Struck by his royal appearance, Virata questioned him of his identity. Arjuna introduced himself as a professional dancer and musician trained by *gandharvas*, claiming to be an expert in singing, hair decoration, and all such feminine arts. Virata, having not encountered such a person in his life before, was suspicious of him and initially offered his kingdom to him but Arjuna refused. Arjuna then exhibited his skills before the court and was even tested by the women in the court to ensure his gender. Having passed all the tests, Virata was satisfied with the demeanour of Arjuna.

Virata, impressed by Arjuna, agreed to give him shelter in the palace and instructed him to live among the palace women and teach them singing and dancing. He then named Arjuna as 'Brihannala' who soon became a favourite in the court. He even instructed his daughter Uttara to learn from Brihannala personally and treat her with great respect. Virata's behaviour towards Brihannala stands out as he never disrespected her for being transgender or treated her as a man. He addressed Brihannala as a female, accepted her nature, and offered her shelter and employment within the royal palace. This treatment of Brihannala by Virata as an equal is an exemplary example of the treatment of an ally towards a queer person.

In ancient Indian literature, it is stated that thirty-three million Gods and Goddesses preside over the various aspects of nature. It is difficult to fully account for and describe all the innumerable Hindu deities. Nevertheless, it may be observed that the

majority of deities worshipped in Hinduism exhibit some form of gender diversity with extremely revered Gods such as Shiva or Vishnu manifesting all three genders.

III. The Kamasutra in Post-Colonial India

Before Alain Danielou's translation of the Kamasutra was published in 1995, Sir Richard Burton's 1883 version was the most widely known English version of the Kamasutra (Burton, 1883, 23). Burton's version can be considered inadequate as it omits many sections, misreads others, and condenses most parts of the text. He also tends to portray Asian sexuality as more primitive than European sexuality (Burton, 1963, 58). Scholarly editions of the Kamasutra are difficult to find. Kumkum Roy reports that librarians tend to keep the text away from public viewing with other erotica and hesitate to allow readers access to it (Roy, 1996, 6). In India, today, sex education is non-existent in schools and colleges, and sexual matters are not considered to be subjects fit for discussion in most social, political, and academic forums.

The standard Hindi translation of the Kamasutra by Pandit Madhavacharya named Kamasutram that is used by scholars today was published in 1911, reissued in 1934 with a fifty-page introduction by the translator and reprinted in 1995 (Madhavacharya, 1995, 1-50). In the Introduction to the text, Madhavacharya argues that young people should study the Kamasutra to learn the right forms of conjugal sex and to stay away from the wrong forms. According to him, the wrong forms of sex are all non-vaginal and non-conjugal forms including masturbation, oral, and anal sex. In addition to that, the epitome of wrong sex and society's evils is homosexual activity, especially between men.

Madhavacharya titles his commentary '*Purursharthaprabhakhya*' which translates to manliness being brought to light through interpretation. He argues about the importance of desire as a driving force in the universe. Citing the creation story in which Brahma becomes the universe by saying 'I am one, let me become many', he decreed that all desires are divine. However, Madhavacharya does not retain this liberal position as the next section is titled 'Stopping improper tendencies in desire'. In this section, he states that all sages tried to control desire but few succeeded. He believes it is necessary to study desire in order to control any 'improper tendencies'.

He denounces adultery and states that monogamous sex with one's lawfully wedded wife for the purposes of procreation alone is the only appropriate kind of sex.

Madhavacharya's next section is titled 'Intimacy with a woman belonging to another is absolutely forbidden'. In this section, he denounces modern fiction and romances that glorify non-marital love. Medieval poetics had developed *shingara rasa* or erotic emotion as primary in literature with non-marital eroticism as one of its chief forms. Many scholars and critics claim that adulterous or *parakiya* love, being the riskiest and least possessive, was the appropriate symbol for the love shared among Gods. Madhavacharya disregards this tradition to hammer home his post-Victorian nationalist ideal. He also denounces modern women in this section—women who do not want to be mothers, adulterous women, and prostitutes. He reads the section of the Kamasutra that deals with courtesans as a means to warn men into falling into the “net of deceit” that prostitutes use to “sway wealthy men” (Madhavacharya, 1995, 20)

However, the most important part of Madhavacharya's argument is a section called 'The Reason for the Present Disasters' where he writes—

“The present government has laid down severe penalties for unnatural fornication and the subjects fear these penalties, but who then are the immoral ones who practice unnatural immorality? We are not told how to recognize them, but in the section on oral sex, the author of the Kamasutra has drawn a portrait of their activities and has also introduced us to their identity, saying 'Usually, this act is performed by shandas' [a term for impotent men not used by Vatsyayana].” (Madhavacharya, 1995, 26)

Madhavacharya then quotes verses on homosexual activity. The verses he quotes are not the ones on oral sex performed by people of the third sex, but verses II 9:35-39 which describe oral sex between male servants and consenting male friends. He even issues a warning that these evil practices like homosexuality are spreading among young men like a disease. Good education, in this case, can only purify their souls and allow them to become healthy, disease-free, good charactered heroes who would make the country proud.

Madhavacharya argues for sex education but he wants the education to be anti-sex and not pro-sex. According to Kidwai and Vanita, his homophobia and fear of everything except vaginal penetrative sex within the boundaries of a marital relationship derives from a late nineteenth century discourse that is an amalgamation

of Puritanism, heterosexism, and paranoia (Kidwai and Vanita, 2000, 238). For instance, in II 6:49, when the text mentions anal intercourse and hints that such intercourse can take place with a man or a woman, Madhavacharya not only translates the term ‘anus’ as ‘bad path’ but also adds his own footnote where he says that anal intercourse is unnatural fornication and men who indulge in such things become unfit to have natural sex with women with them losing their masculine energy. In another instance in verses II. 9, the chapter on oral sex and third nature, when the chapter describes men of the third nature who takes the form of women, Madhavacharya adds a footnote that—

“Such boys do not engage solely in oral activity, they also engage in another type of unnatural fornication. People involved in theater commonly are puppets of that type of vice They all pretend to be pure, though.” (*Madhavacharya, 1995, 522*)

Sutras 35 and 36 present Madhavacharya with a problem because they describe oral sex between two men (both of whom are consenting friends and have the full status of a citizen). Forced to acknowledge this sexual activity between men, he adds a footnote saying that such boys engage not only in oral activity but also in other types of unnatural fornications. According to him, mostly people involved in theatre commonly share this vice.

This type of attitude is not unique to Madhavacharya. In 1975, Marxist scholar N. N. Bhattacharya in his book *History of Indian Erotic Literature* glorified a different part of the Indian past. Unlike Madhavacharya, he wished to homogenise the Sanskrit texts. The Kamasutra, according to him, catered to the crude and perverse imagination of a certain class of men. He argued that subordinate classes that constituted most of the population were much closer to primitive matriarchal values which are still prevalent among lower classes and tribes in India (Kidwai and Vanita, 2000, 239-240). ‘Matriarchal values’ identify women with the fertility principle and treat the heterosexual sexual act as a sacrifice. Women who can have sex with more than one man are defined by him as “enjoying their sexual freedom” (Bhattacharya, 1975, 22). Bhattacharya viewed the Kamasutra as worthless in sexual matters and deemed it to have a patriarchal outlook. Although Bhattacharya appears to be opposite to Madhavacharya with his more liberatory outlooks, but they both agree that sex for pleasure alone is perverse whereas sex for procreational purposes alone is pure.

Hence, while the text of the Kamasutra might seem irrelevant in today's times, its usage now to criminalize and demonise certain genders and sexual orientations that were deemed 'common practice' back then, is the reason why it should be re-read and re-contextualised. Rereading the ancient Indian texts and maintaining their authenticity in their readaptations, be it to children or adults, validates independence of all genders and their sexual freedom. It is necessary to note, hence, how readaptations of ancient Indian texts affect the mind of the young and adult readers alike.

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