

Hijras, Hinduism and Gender



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If you ask someone in any western country what the rainbow flag represents, many will let you know that it symbolizes the LGBTQ+ community. However, if you pose the same question to many first generation South Asian immigrants in the United States, the answer is not the same. As a child of South Asian immigrants, I cannot guarantee that my parents—or parents of my friends—would be able to confidently tell you that this is the LGBTQ+ community flag. In fact, I would not be confident in the fact that these adults would even know what LGBTQ+ stands for. And, even if they are growing up in America today, children of these adults might not know what the community is, either.

While gender queerness is much more accepted and understood in non-South Asian westerners, Natasha Roy, a writer for NBC News argues that it is not as well accepted in India, where being queer is regarded as “otherness.” This results in the lack of knowledge and education received by our parents about the LGBTQ+ community. In most Indian films, characters that are homosexual are only seen as the laughing stocks of the movie, or used for more drama in films such as “Dostana,” “Kal Ho Naa Ho” and “Kapoor and Sons.” They are used as entertainment and never represented in the diversity or nuance that the community holds. This leads to many South Asian Americans growing up in households where only mainstream heterosexuality is accepted.

Oftentimes in first generation South Asian families, coming out as anything other than heterosexual can be extremely harmful to individuals and could enact a significant amount of trauma. It is hard to create a path that has not been paved for you. In my experience as a South Asian immigrant in America, I have never seen a character who is part of the LGBTQ+ community and is South Asian; it is no surprise that many South Asians do not validate individuals in a community that is not represented. Queer South Asians can understandably feel as though being queer is incompatible with their ethnicity. I myself have been paternalistically told that being gay is not part of our culture—despite being a proud ally.

However strong the modern anti-LGBTQ+ senti-

ments in South Asian families, they are actually a misconception; it is simply false to believe that gender queer identities are not part of Hinduism or in India. South Asians have a long, storied and sympathetic history of our vibrant and diverse sexuality.

Gender queer identities have been a part of Hinduism since 400 B.C., as evidenced by the Karma Sutra: a Hindu text sharing the pleasures of sexuality. Hijras are the intersex, queer and transgender community of Hinduism. These people have been a part of famous Hindu texts, such as Ramayanam (the story of Rama’s exile to the forest) and Mahabaratam (the battle between Pandavas and Kauravas for the throne of Hastinapura).

Before we really dig deeper into gender queer identities, let us learn more about Hijras. These people compose the intersex, transgender and queer community in India. According to Jeffrey Gettleman from The New York Times, the Hijra community is largely made up of individuals who were assigned male at birth, and then undergo gender confirmation surgery to transition into females or non-binary people. However, not all transgender people are Hijras. This transition also includes adornments of jewelry, hair and clothing.

Before colonization, Hijras were known for their ability to bless or curse individuals. They were invited to baby showers to bless babies with luck and prosperity. They were seen as a symbol of beauty, love and opportunity. During colonization, Hijras were criminalized and demonized and, according to Gettleman, they were unjustly seen as evil abominations of nature.

During the 1800 and 1900s, the British empire ruled over India. Gettleman notes that the monarchy used a combination of its religion and sovereignty as a tool to colonize India. There were many gender, cultural and sexuality roles imposed on the citizens of India that interrupted their LGBTQ+ history. There were laws, such as Section 377, that criminalized homosexuality and penalized gender queer identities. This led to the brutal torture and imprisonment of the gender queer community in India, and eventually hateful sentiments spread across South Asian countries and

and The History of Identity

and territories that still exist to this day.

In 2018, Section 377 of the British penal code in India was struck down in a massive win for human rights: homosexuality can no longer be criminalized by the state. This promotes equal rights for all individuals of the LGBTQ+ community—just as heterosexuals have had forever.

But this especially helps particularly marginalized members of the queer South Asian community; the stories of Hijras, gender queer and non-conforming individuals in the LGBTQ+ community are becoming more mainstream, rather than being kicked to the sidelines. They can share their own narratives and speak up on behalf of themselves. After years of offensive depictions of queer South Asians in the media, decriminalization promises new representation. Now, as acceptance grows, Hijras are slowly returning to the symbol of prosperity, peace and value they were seen before, in texts such as Mahabharata and Ramayanam.

It can be hard to educate oneself on LGBTQ+ history and rights when queer people have been oppressed in mainstream media and marginalized in their own ethnic communities. To improve awareness and education, role models are important. Inspiring, guiding individuals who advocate for LGBTQ+ people and explain how to best support them, role models showcase their identity and share how to be a good ally.

Although it is hard to find role models that speak about such issues, especially considering the polarity of LGBTQ+ topics in South Asian cultures, there are some role models that are helping tear down these barriers. Alok V. Menon is an internationally acclaimed gender queer and non-conforming activist. They speak upon degendering fashion, transgender rights and much more. In fact, Menon was a special guest in Jameela Jamilla's "I-Weigh" podcast, where the pair discussed gender conformity, trans-exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs) and how to become a better ally to those who are oppressed. Menon includes that in many South Asian cultures, clothes truly do not have a specific gender.

In fact, lungis are long pieces of cloth tied as a skirt for men. This is roughly the same thing as saris, a three-pieced article of clothing that is worn by females and Hijras.

Panchas are traditional pants worn by men, similar to lungis for traditional functions. Panchas and patialas are nearly identical kinds of pants that can be worn by males, females and Hijras in South Asia.

Although many South Asian immigrants have assimilated to wearing what is considered the supposed norm in western clothing, it is clear that South Asia's past included acceptance of communities and ideals that are just starting to be accepted into western cultures today. Menon even talks about how most of these social justice movements of degendering fashion, trans rights and non-binary inclusivity are simply us returning to our South Asian cultures. Recognizing our history of gender queer identities is a return to our South Asian identity.

We know that sexuality was fluid, and accepted in many South Asian cultures and religions—but we are not alone. According to the LGBTQ+ news site, Openly, non-binary and gender queer identities exist in cultures throughout the world, including Two Spirits in the North American Indigenous cultures, Fa'afafine in Samoa, Metis in Nepal, Bugis in Indonesia, Brotherboys and sistergirls in Aboriginal Australia and Toms in Thailand. How do we come back to these roots? How do we unlearn imperialist narratives? How do we honor the history that has always been here?

First and foremost, education and awareness are a must. Do not wait for someone to educate you; educate yourself. We are all busy human beings, but you owe it to both yourself and the world to get educated. Like Menon, Jameela Jamil and Lilly Singh are great examples of role models to look up to in regard to social justice issues that pertain to race and gender identity.

If you are a gender queer person of color, I encourage you to speak up if you feel safe, are ready and want to. If you are not—and especially if you are white—do not speak over their voices. Colonization enacted severe pain and crisis upon gender queer South Asians, and it is important that we all uncover the truth behind what whitewashed history tells us.

Giving the power back to the Hijras requires more than just words. Do not sideline or ostracize individuals who are sacred and a part of South Asian cultures. It is time to take action. Support your Black and brown gender non-conforming, non-binary and gender queer siblings. Stand with them in solidarity, and respect their voices.