



“Born to Two Mothers, The Hero Bhagiratha”: Understanding Homosexuality in Indian Mythology

Chandrabali Sarkar

Student, Lady Brabourne College, University of Calcutta, Kolkata, India

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Abstract

Indian mythology has several narratives of homosexuality and homoeroticism but the narratives were often seen as taboo and were being marginalized for decades. With the advancement of time, the interpretation of the same ancient tales has upturned because of the modern scholars and comic artists who inverted the perspective of seeing the culture in India from a pessimistic turn to an optimistic one.

I. INTRODUCTION

Homosexuality and homoeroticism are quite controversial terms, especially when connected with Indian mythology. Though the instances of homoerotic relationships and queer identities were abundant in Indian mythology and they were utterly explicit in nature. But these narratives were usually seen through the lens of the selfishness of pleasure or gaining something significant. When this queer relationship would let the Gods gain something phenomenal like the conjugation of Agni and Soma representing that in the universe existence involves the *anna*, the food, [Agni-Principle] and the *annada*, the consumer, [Soma-Principle] i.e. “*eka-yonyā-tmakāv agnīṣomau*” [“All this universe of conscious and unconscious is made up of Agni (fire) and Soma (the offering)” (*Mahabharata –Shanthi parva-328.52*)], or like Mitra and Varuna representing two moon-phases. But when read with modern interpretation and perspective their relationship is more than just the image of phenomenal acts existing in the universe. Furthermore, the same Indian mythology, also states about the punishments of homosexual relationships where were being punished as Manusmriti [a book written by Manu (Svayambhuva) and Bhrigu on dharma topics such as duties, rights, laws, conduct, virtues, and others] states about the fine of two

hundred pennies for girls and tonsuring and chopping of fingers for mature women involved in lesbian relationships.

In present-day existence, sometimes these myths depict how society has evolved optimistically and, sometimes, also aid in discarding misconceptions of certain notions that are acquired by the pessimistic mass of the society regarding their own culture and tradition. Myths narrate stories of women who were victims of impudent patriarchal customs and the chauvinistic mentality of male individuals and, on the other hand, tell stories with a feministic bend, free expression of gender and sexuality, and innovative imaginations that are relevant in contemporary society. If read without unitary vision, then an individual would land on various interpretations of the myths that would depart a whole new sense of the same myth. But this reading and narrative of myth becomes more exciting and convenient to the general masses when the language and the narrative are uncomplicated and effortless. What could be easier comical and modern narratives of ancient stories? Illustrator Priya Dali was inspired by author Ruth Vanita’s essay “Born to Two Mothers, The Hero Bhagiratha”. She created a graphic novel under the same name featuring a fourteenth-century homosexual relationship between two queens, taken from Kritivasa Ramayana [a Bengali mythical literature].

II. DISCUSSION

There is a stereotypical popular understanding and misconception among people that queer relations, women's desires, queer sexuality, and non-binary gender are 'concepts' that came to Asian cultures due to Western influence and are considered quintessentially antinormative. These misconceptions are followed by "marginalisations of 'nonnormative' desires and sexualities by the mainstream lie." [Queering Tribal Folktales from East and Northeast India, 2021, Kaustav Chakraborty]. Although, when tracing down the underlying meanings beyond well-established beliefs, the myths from ancient texts of these Asian countries provided the social scenario of queer relations and sexuality quite artfully. China, Japan, India, Philippines, Iran, Mesopotamia, and several other countries from the Asiatic region might have hatred and stigma for same-sex relationships or marriage, non-binary gender, female sexual desires, and other 'marginalized' and 'tabooed' matters, but the myths from these regions would not deny the existence of these 'nonnormative' matters. Apparently, India is recognizing and accommodating the existence of non-heterosexual gender and queer sexualities from ancient times and the colonization of the Western World brought the concept of 'against the order of nature' in reference to non-heterosexual non-procreative sexual acts.

As pointed out by mythologist and writer Devdutt Pattanaik, if one considers ancient Indian texts like Veda, itihasa, Purana, dharma-shastra, Kama-shastra, natya-shastra, ayurveda, of the Hindus, as well as in Jain agamas and Buddhist pitakas, then there are over fifty words for non-heterosexual gender and sexualities in Sanskrit, Prakrit, and Tamil. For instance, there are stories from ancient Indian texts of men with queer sexualities like the *mukhebhaga* [Men who are into oral sex with other men], the *sevyaka* [Men who are sexually enjoyed by other men], the *irshyaka* [The voyeur who watches other men engaged in the sexual act], the *asekya* [Men who swallow the semen of other men], the *saugandhika* [Men who smell the genital or pheromones of other men], the *kumbhika* [Men who take a passive role in anal sex], and the *shandha* [Men who have qualities and behavior of women] and includes the stories of the *svairini* [Women who engage in the homosexual act].

The comic narrative "Born to Two Mothers, The Hero Bhagiratha" by Piyali Dali explicitly depicts the two Queens – Chandra and Mala – of King Dilipa as *svairini* but the depiction was quite beyond the diction of pessimistic underlying meanings, evil lust, or any other defaming labels. This might induce the question "How can the tale still be publicized if it impacts negatively?" The negative interpretation was induced in the minds of the readers and

the love tale got corrupted due to the invasion of foreign culture and foreign mindset with the passing of time.

When the tales and myths are observed and read thoroughly, it could be noticed that in recent decades homoerotic relationships are portrayed through two conflicting concepts. On one hand, they only indicate the sole purpose of being intimate is pleasure which was presented negatively and does not lead to any norms of love. It was believed that the human urge to do with sexual orientation or to find sexual pleasure in any relationship other than heterosexual relationship disturbs the "order of nature". And on the other hand, it was considered another form of love that led to miraculous outcomes. But the latter one is also controversial because it always comes with the "morally correct" explanation. So, the norm of having a sensual relationship under the norms of love is not worth considering within a homosexual relationship. This argument is briefly depicted in the comic "Born to Two Mothers, The Hero Bhagiratha" where the two characters [the mother and the son] are in discussion with each other on the legitimacy of how 'love' is involved in the sexual relationship of the two Queens Chandra and Mala which ultimately led to the birth of Bhagiratha. The statements like "Did the queens truly love each other?" and "Wasn't it ... fated by God?" are throwing light on the above-mentioned conflicts and interestingly, the questions are coming from the son, the image of contemporary mass who are unaware of the truths behind the myth. Even, the mother character could not deny the fact that their conjugation might be fated by God for some 'miraculous' event. To these statements, the mother character herself states how the relationship between the Queens is neither breaking the so-called order of nature as nature is intimately involved in their conjugal act nor their intimacy distorted by any professed morally correct clarification. And added how to make this miraculous event happen, the Queens were faced with "conflict, struggle, and defiance of social norms."

Now, it might occur how their relationship is distinctively standing out from these two pre-assumed conceptions. In the comic, there is a panel with the illustration of a "stormy day," a dark sky "with clouds", and images of swans and peacocks. This illustration is clearly depicting the season of the monsoon and there are several instances in literature, especially in Indian Literature, where the monsoon is regarded to be a season of 'love' and 'romance'. This sketch was drawn in terms of portraying 'love' being involved in the relationship and 'lust' and 'task' given by God(s) concepts were kept behind the lines. Furthermore, in another panel, it was shown that their intimate act was enhanced by the presence of God Kama who was the god of "love, desire, and union." God Kama is a mythical character who was acting as equivalent to the Roman mythical figure

Cupid. So, the illustrator artfully defied the notions and stereotypes held against the narrative of this mythical tale. Dali constantly emphasized the optimistic perspective of the relationship.

Dali also focused on another significant aspect of the mythical tale in her comic is the image of God Kama as the contemporary image of a “sperm donor” in same-sex parenthood. The sentence “Bhage Bhage Sambhog je tathe Upagato” which loosely translates to “one who born of the conjugation of bhaga (vulva),” might mislead that Bhagiratha was born out of vaginal intercourse only which would be scientifically and naturally not possible. This assumption would again give birth to the dilemma of whether same-sex parenthood might not be a reality and distorts natural order. But when closely read, the illustrator distinctly mentioned as well as drew the ‘tej’ or ‘energy’ of God Kama which could be interpreted as ‘semen’ donated by God Kama to initiate Queen Mala’s pregnancy. Dali showed how women impregnated through sperm donation might get defamed by society, especially if she is a widow of a man, and quite also craftily approached that impregnation does not require intimacy with a male partner. Here, the image of Brahma was portrayed as a spokesperson of modern science where same-sex parenthood is possible through sperm donation and surrogacy.

The presence of God Kama during the intimate act of the Queens can also be interpreted as the present day’s concept of three DNA babies. The baby is born through Mitochondrial Replacement Techniques (MRTs) that involve combining genetic material from the nucleus of one woman’s egg, DNA from the mitochondria of another woman’s egg, and a sperm.

III. CONCLUSION

The comic has not only approached a homoerotic relationship of the fourteenth century through the lens of mutual love but also appreciated the idea of same-sex parenting and seeded the idea of pregnancy for same-sex couples. Myths are like ‘fossils’ or dead remnants of ancient stories but these fossils are the sources that lead one to the history of their own culture. Myths show the roots of an individual’s rituals, beliefs, cultural heritage, social customs, and several more minute details of ancient society. This is not only efficacious for the audience who were unaware of the progressive enriching culture that existed in the ancient texts but also significant for adolescent audiences as they might not find texts written in an ancient language that is hard to comprehend but a comic narrative would surely connect them to their own roots through an optimistic and advancing lens where the concepts are not obsolete and unreliable.

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