CHAPTER 4

SHAME FREE CULTURES ARE TOLERANT TOWARDS SEX RELATED DIFFERENCE LIKE MSM BEHAVIOUR

4.1. INTRODUCTION

Evidence for the phenomenon called same sex activity can be found in records through centuries and spanning widely separated cultures. Classical mythology, East and West histories along with cultural anthropology point to the widespread pervasiveness of the same sex phenomenon. Extensive literature is available in the same sex phenomenon. The purpose to outline and indicate the wealth of the material to show that same sex orientation is a nature phenomenon, which didn’t need to be so stigmatized and discriminated as it has been done in the culture and religions which are highly biased against same sex orientations. Our surmise is that knowledge of the extent of the same sex phenomenon will help reducing the stigma. Importance is given to describe the less documented same sex phenomenon in India.

4.2. Simple Cultures

The homosexual practices in relation to the sexual attraction of people to the same sex must have been around from the very dawn of humanity. The earliest accounts of homosexuality are found in the ancient religious practices. What is practiced in real life gets into the religious practices in the case of simple cultures. For them the Sacred permeated the entire life.

The religion of the indigenous people worshiped many gods and goddesses. They were often associated with fertility, agriculture, and war – three most important ways of their livelihood. The food gathering tribes later developed agriculture
domesticating the plants and the hunting tribes later domesticated the animals. War was the constant preoccupation of these nomadic animal domesticated tribes. Fertility was underlying factor for all these ways of living. Naturally then, they created their gods after their most important needs fertility, agriculture and war. One of the early gods of the Assyrians, which later spread into the area known as Canaan, was the goddess Asherah. She was worshiped as the goddess of fertility. Often worship of this goddess included orgies and sexual practices. The goddess of fertility was often worshipped in the form of a tree, which was central in a grove where worship was conducted. Such ‘sacred groves’ (kavu) still exist in Kerala particularly in the northern part, Malabar.

When the gods were understood as many, gods could be both male and female. Unlike the gods of the Semitic patriarchal religions, these gods could be having the physical need of the ordinary mortal human beings. Gods were believed to have sex among themselves and with men. Having sex with a god as a part of worship, or seek help for fertile crops, animals, was a natural thing among the indigenous people. The women dominated agricultural tribes probably worshiped the female organ as the source of life, while the men dominated hunting tribe worshiped the phallus as the source of life.

4.2.1. Phallic – Penis Worship

It is our common knowledge that Shiva is worshipped with a linga, or phallic pole. The myth behind the Linga Worship is that once Shiva went into the woods to watch men play, they caught him and cut off his penis in order for Shiva to be restrained. Once they learned he was a god they replaced his penis with an artificial
Tammuz was the Phoenician deity identified with Adonis of the Greeks. He was the husband of Ishtar also known as Asherah to the Semites and Aphrodite to the Greeks. Followers of the cult believed that Tammuz was a handsome shepherd who was killed by a wild beast. His wife’s longing for him led her to enter Hades to deliver him from death. His worship is connected with poles, similar to Totem poles of the early Native Americans, which said to return from Hades every spring and return there during the winter. In some cultures his worship included homosexual activities. Adonis is referred to in the erotic literature of the homosexual community today. His supposedly perfect body and beauty is sometimes promoted as an ideal that may often take on god-like dimensions. The Greek God Dyonysus was worshipped and followed by men known as Satyrs, who are always depicted with an erected penis. Some versions of the Babylonian god Baal worship also often included a pole or phallic symbol.

As the ancient Babylonians gained influence they spread their religion. Babylonian cities included towers, or Ziggurats, which served may practical and religious purposes. These towers were strategic to the defence of the city. They also served as points from which the stars could be plotted both for scientific study as well as for religious significance. One additional purpose of these towers was as shrines. The tower at Babylon is attributed with gold statues of gods and a golden bench at the top for sexual worship. Ziggurat towers appear to have been plentiful in the days of ancient Babylonian influence. They served as phallic symbols. Early worship at these towers included masturbation allowing the man to spill his semen on the earth. The

59 Siva: the erotic ascetic, Wendy Doniger O’flaherty, Oxford
earth was seen as female, since seed is sown in the earth, therefore male gods were invoked to make and keep the ground fertile.

The phallic towers remain to this day. The various orders of masons erect towers as memorials. May Day⁶⁰ is a holiday in the British Isles when a phallic pole is decorated with streamers and coloured and a festive dance is performed. This spring rite is directly connected to ancient fertility practices seeking the god’s blessing on the spring crops.

One of the most famous Ziggurats and the best archaeological find of such a tower is at Ur of the Chaldees, home of the ancient patriarch Abraham. Abraham’s father had been an idol maker in this prominent town. Abraham is revered as the father of faith for the Jews, Islam, and Christianity.

In our oriental culture sky is considered to be the he-god and the earth, the she-god. Rain was thought to be the semen spilled by the sky-god. This believes is even today among it and us has inspired the poets to weave beautiful imageries such as: “Bhoomi devi pushppithayayi, Kama devanulsawamayi....” The unique Pooram⁶¹ celebration in Northern Malabar is another remnant fertility cult. The young girls who have not reached puberty worship the Kama Devan making his effigy for nine days every year. The purpose is to get his blessing to grow up into a very fertile woman.

Towers and poles have been included in many forms of ancient religious practice. They are often associated with the penis in order to deify male-ness. Towers similar to the Babylonian temples have been found in ancient Egypt. Towers found in

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⁶⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beltane
⁶¹ Pooram pronounced [puːrəm] is an annual festival, which is celebrated in temples dedicated to goddesses Durga or Kali held especially in Valluvanadu area and other adjoining parts of north-central Kerala (Present Palakkad, Thrissur and Malappuram districts) after the summer harvest.
the unknown Maya culture, which is not known to the other parts in North America. For the simple people everything is god, developed totem pole, which are more obviously phallic, as a part of their worship of nature as god. Masturbation, leading to excretion of the semen and sperm onto the ground, has often played a part in the worship of the early indigenous simple people.62

4.2.2 Strengthening the Male-ness of the Male God

Human beings in their effort to appease the natural forces have created supernatural forces with human attributes. With the men dominance the male and the male sexuality gained prominence. Spilling the sperm as part of fertility cult through masturbation might have been the first sexual expression in early worship. Evidence suggests pagan priests orally stimulated the sexual organs of the worshippers in order to facilitate masturbation in ancient mid-eastern cults. God men and Shamans even today are people with gay orientations. It is natural, then, homosexual activities to become part of early worship and rituals. Male gods planting seeds became more productive in men dominated cultures. It was thought when a man ejaculates his semen into another man’s anus in the shrine; he was depositing more male power to the gods. With the additional strength of many men’s semen, the god could then ensure a bountiful crop, a larger herd, and many children to care for the filed and for hunting63.

Later in history this practice grew into, a means of supplying money for the temple. Boys and men who were exclusively used for passive anal sex began to serve the temples. One must wonder whether boys were sometimes forced into this kind of sexual contact economic circumstances. Prostitution was a result of women oppression

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62 Totem poles are monumental sculptures carved on poles, posts, or pillars with symbols or figures made from large trees, mostly western red cedar, by indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest coast of North America (northwestern United States and Canada's western province, British Columbia).
63 https://www.bartleby.com/essay/Homosexuality-P3HK2NZVC
in a male dominated world. In the beginning of male domination both male and female prostitutes were used in temple worship in order to raise funds for the temple, as well as to support themselves.\textsuperscript{64}

4.3. Gay-Sex in India

In India, ‘male’ and ‘female’ are seen as natural categories in complementary opposition. It includes, gender roles such as different sexual characteristics for male and female, different reproductive organs, different sexual natures, and take different and complementary, roles in marriage, sexual relations and reproduction. The biological nature of the dichotomy between male and female is amply demonstrated in both the medical and ritual texts of classical Hinduism. In these texts bodily fluids and sexual organs are presented as both the major sources of the sex and gender dichotomy and its major symbols (Henry O’Flaherty:1980, 134). Each sex has its essential, innate nature, consisting of physical and moral qualities, although these are alterable. The different genders other than the classical male and female are accommodated between the two.

The pre-classical Hindu culture of Indian tribal, the female principle is more active, animating the inert and latent male principle. This female principle has a positive, creative and life-giving aspect as well as a destructive, life-destroying aspect. All over India, particularly in south India, the Mother goddess (Sakti) cult which highlights aggressive dimension of the female principle is very powerful even today. Third gender groups such as Hijras, Thirunangaiar and Kothis seemed to have thrived during this period. Sexually inadequate men appeared to have taken shelter in the

\textsuperscript{64} Foucault Michael (1980)
margins of the society and claimed special divine power to bless and give boon on special occasions such as marriage and childbirth.

The Aryan hunting culture domesticated the female principle caging the women in the home surroundings. They somehow came to the understanding that the erotic aspect of female power is dangerous unless it is controlled by the male principle. To them, the robust women of the indigenous culture were a threat and they propagated the ideology that women are dangerous unless the men restrain them. Thus, we have in the Hinduism today two clear streams of the indigenous Dravidian culture, which is female dominated and the Aryan culture that is female restrained. One can surmise that the male principle dominated Aryan culture and cult has either totally subsumed as in the case of north India or compromised as in the case of south India. According to Vedic cultural (classical Hindu), understanding the sexual aspect of female power is dangerous unless it is controlled by the male principle. Powerful women, whether deities or humans, must be restrained by male authority. Thus, the Hindu goddess subordinated to her male consort is beneficent.

In the Aryan culture dominated society the already existed gay-sex groups were accommodated under different interpretation. Both in Hinduism and in Islam of India today, women are believed to be more sexually voracious than men are. To prevent their sexual appetites from causing social chaos and distracting men from their higher spiritual duties, women must be controlled. This, opposition between male and female sexuality is joined to other oppositions in the Hindu classification system between hot and cold, erotic and acetic. It is the hot, erotic, aspects of female sexuality that the gay sex groups in India partake of and display and that transform them into “sacred, erotic, female men” embodying both the beneficial and destructive potential of the goddess
The fusion of the Dravidian and Aryan culture made complementary opposition of male and female as well as created a healthy space of the gay sex groups. The interchange of male and female qualities, transformations of sex and gender and alternative sex and gender roles, both among deities and humans, are meaningful and positive in Hindu mythology, ritual and art (Ibid).

Arjuna of Mahabharata lives for years in the guise of a eunuch, wearing bangles, braiding his hair like a woman, dressing in female attire and teaching the women of the king’s court to sing and dance. In this disguise, Arjuna participates in weddings and births, providing legitimization for the ritual contexts in which the ‘third genders’ in India perform. The portrayal of Arjuna in popular enactments of the Mahabharata in a vertically divided half-man, half-woman form highlights this identification. Arjuna’s Arthanarishvara is repeated in the case of sexually ambivalent Siva. Arthanarishvara supports the identification of Arjuna, an Aryan God and Siva, a Dravidian God with third gender people. Siva is the product of the promiscuous era of the Indian society. He became an ascetic absorbing the religious values of Aryan culture; thus, Siva is an ascetic – one who renounces sex – and yet he appears in many erotic and procreative roles (O’Flaherty: 1973). His most powerful symbol and object of worship is the lingam, or phallus, but the phallus is usually set in the yoni, female genitals. The generative power of the phallus severed from Siva is another important point of identification between him and the third gender group (Herdt 1994:376).

Vishnu and Krishna, an avatar (incarnation) of Vishnu, are often presented as androgynous forms. In one myth, Vishnu transforms himself into Mohini, the most beautiful woman in the world, to take back the sacred canter from the Asuras (demons) who have stolen it. In another myth, Krishna, Dravidian God, takes on female form to
destroy the demon, Arakan, whose strength came from his chastity. Krishna is able to overcome Arakan by transforming himself into a beautiful woman who lures Arakan into marriage and domesticates him.

In another myth, the basis of important festivals in South India (Kovaham in Tamilnadu) attended by Third Genders, Krishna comes to earth as a woman to marry a king’s son, who by this marriage granted success in battle by the gods. The price the son had to pay was his own life in the battle. During the festivals, the Third Gender devotees enact the role of women who marry and later, as widows, mourn the death of their husbands, which we shall see in detail below. An important ritual at the Jagannatha temple in Orissa involves a sequence in which a young man dressed as a female temple dancer seduce Balabhadra, the ascetic elder brother of the deity Jagannatha, who is identified with Siva (ibid).

In some Hindu sects, worship involves male transvestism as a form of devotion. Among the Sakhibhava, a sect devoted to Krishna in which he may not be worshiped directly, the devotees impersonate Radha, and through her devotees worship Krishna indirectly. In this, male devotees dress in women’s clothing, simulate menstruation and have sexual relations with men, and some devotees even castrate themselves (Sudhir Kakar:1981, 56).

In Hindu view, Hermaphroditism is the ideal. In Tantric sect, the Supreme Being is conceptualized as one complete sex, containing male and female sexual organs. In some of these sects, male transvestism is used as a way of transcending one’s own sex, a prerequisite to achieving salvation. In other Tantric sects religious exercised involve the male devotee imitating a woman to realize the woman in himself; only in this way does the sect believe that true love can be realized (Bullough:1976:124).
Ancient Hindu texts refer to alternative sexes and genders among humans and deities. The ancient texts mention four categories of third sex: male eunuchs who have desiccated testes; the male eunuchs who has been castrated; the hermaphrodite; and the female eunuch, a woman who does not menstruate (ibid). The Kama Sutra also specifically refers to eunuchs and the particular sexual practices they should engage in.

The ancient Hindu attitude towards same sex lovers among humans and deities is reinforced by the historical role of the eunuch in Hindu and Muslim courts. The third gender Hindu deities translated into the court culture boosts up the human third gender orientations. It is the cultural flexibility of Indian society that permits sexual ambiguity and accords it a measure of power even today. Hinduism still appears content to allow differences to be tolerated, “celebrating the idea that the universe is boundlessly various, and …that all possibilities may exist without excluding other” (O’Flaherty 1973:318)

4.3.1. Hijras

Hijras are devotees of Bahuchara Mata, (patron goddess of hijras worshipped in Gujarat) one of the many versions of the Mother Goddess in India. The sexual impotent men make themselves to be a devotee of Bahuchara Mata and dress up and act like women. Thus, they are a mix of transsexuals, transvestites, homosexuals, hermaphrodites and eunuchs. Men who are born with underdeveloped genitals and mentally ‘impotent’ undergo operation to make themselves Hijras. In one of the folk stories associated with Bahuchara Mata, the goddess was once a princess who castrated her husband because he preferred going to forest and ‘behaving as a woman’ instead of coming to her bridal bed. In another story, the man who attempted to molest

65 For the discussion on Hijras I depended heavily on Website articles and the Herdt Gilbert (1994)
Bahucharaji was cursed with impotency. He was forgiven only after he gave up his masculinity, dressed as a woman and worshipped the goddess. The hijras said to be endowed with divine powers of the Goddess (sakti) and of the ascetic (thapasian). As vehicles of divine power, hijras engage in their traditional occupations of performing at the birth of a male child and at marriage in the temple. Hijras also engage in prostitution with men, although this directly contradicts their culturally sanctioned ritual roles. Hijras lead a life within their own social communities. They are treated as a ‘caste’ by themselves and get a mixed response of respect and ridicule from the public.

Hijra-like phenomenon is universal. They have existed and continue to exist in varying forms, under a host of names, and in number of different cultures. Among the Native American tribes, transgender persons were variously known as winkte in Lokota tribe, hemanch, among Cheyenne tribe, and nadle among Navajo. French settlers and explorers referred to them as berdache. In the country of Oman, they are called xanlth and inhabit a niche between those of men and women. Among the Muslims of Mombasa, Kenya, such individuals are called washoga. (MSN.Com, Hijra)

Hijras have been traditionally a north Indian phenomenon, although they are found in smaller number in the southern regions of the country. Rural Indians often define the hijra as a hermaphrodite, a person with the genitals of both a man and a woman. Others maintain that hijras are mostly transsexuals who give up their male genitals in homage to their goddess, Bahuchar Mata, in a quest for spiritual transcendence (Nanda,1990). There are also those who believe that hijras are homosexual men who undergo sexual surgery, or simply dressing drag, in order to have

66 Depended online - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bahuchar_Mata
sex with other men. In Panjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and other states *hijras* are well known, though in Punjabi they are often called *kurass*.

Unlike cross-dressers or transsexuals in the Western countries, hijras have a sanctioned space in the India culture. They feared and ridiculed at the same time respected. People in India believe such individuals derive a special power from their familiarity with both genders. This power is thought to manifest itself in the ability of the hijras to lay both blessings and curses on others. Thus, no matter how they might be reviled or ridiculed, it is considered wise to stay in their good grace.\(^{67}\)

The popular understanding of the hijra as an alternative sex and gender role is based on the model of the hermaphrodite, a person biologically intersex. The hijras are mainly thought of as more male than female, although females who do not menstruate can also become hijras. Both these glosses emphasize sexual impotence. They identify themselves as incomplete men in that they do not have the desires for women that other men do. They attribute this lack of desire to a defective male sexual organ. A child initially assigned to the male sex whose genitals are later noticed to be ambiguously male would be culturally defined as hijra, or potentially hijra. While ambiguous male genitalia serve as the most important culturally defined sign of the hijra, in practical terms any indication of a loss of masculinity, whether impotence, effeminate behaviour or a desire for sexual relations with men in the receptor role may be taken as a sign that one should join the hijras. Women who fail to menstruate take this as a sign that they should become hijaras, however, masculine behaviour in women is not associated with becoming a hijra. Hijras prefer criteria that are clearly feminine, such as their preference for women’s clothing and women’s occupation, their liking or children, their

\(^{67}\) Monograph on The Clan and Culture of Hijras: An exploration into the Gender Identity and Status of Hijras Inside and Outside, Tissy Mariam Thomas, Centre for Research – Projects, Christ University, Karnataka India, 2013
gendered erotic fantasies and experiences, such as their desire for male sexual partners, their temperaments, feeling shy with men, and their gender identity, as women. Hijras take feminine names when they join the community and use feminine kinship terms for each other such as ‘sister’, “auntie” and “grandmother”. In public transport or accommodations, they request “ladies only” seating and they periodically demand to be counted as women in the census. (Ibid)

But although hijras are ‘like’ women, they are also ‘not women’. Their feminine dress and manners are often exaggerations, particularly in their aggressive sexuality, and indeed are designed to contrast with the normative submissive demeanour of ordinary women. Hijras do not attempt a realistic imitation of women. Their dancing in public is contrary to ordinary feminine behaviour. Hijras use coarse and abusive language, both among themselves and to their audience, which is contrary to the ideal of womanhood in India. They smoke in public, which is behaviour usually reserved for men.

4.3.1.1. Hijras’ Social Structure and Economics

The mother goddess cult and the socio-economic system of caste together maintain the hijra role over time. The caste system of our country with its occupational exclusivity, hierarchical caste allocation of rights and privileges, accommodates many kinds of peoples such as Muslims and indigenous tribal peoples who, though originally outside the Hindu system, become incorporated into it as castes or caste like groups. Although Hijras claim to be ascetics, and thus outside the caste system, they are organized into groups very similar to the caste.

During the field visits, it is observed that Hijras are drawn from many castes and from the Hindu, Muslim and Christian religious communities. Most hijras
predominantly appear to be drawn from the lower castes. The high caste with their economic high position affords to hide their gender identity without being a member of the hijra community. In the Hijra community, no distinctions of purity and pollution are observed. Like other denouncers, their hijra identity transcends caste and kinship affiliations.

Hijras function like a caste in their claim to a monopoly over their occupation as ritual performers on specific occasions. They also exercise control over their members like a caste, without casting the ultimate sanction. Like other castes, hijras have origin myths that justify their claimed place in society. They continually recruit members to the group and keep it going.

Hijras live in communes organized around a relatively permanent group of up to twenty individuals (hamams in south and dera in north India). Members contribute their earnings, whether from performing, begging for alms or prostitution, to the household, in return for which they are given clothes, shelter, food, perhaps jewellery and pocket money by the household leader. The household in the local level even hold property, often in the name of the elder. The ‘houses’ are not local groups, but rather descent groups, functionally equivalent to lineages. Each house has a naik, or chief, who is the leader of that house in a particular city or region. The naiks of a city collectively form a jamat, or meeting of the elders, which handles intra community disputes, sanctions hijras who violate community norms, including expulsion from the community. Jamat makes decisions for the group, acts as the audiences for the initiation of new recruits and mediates whenever necessary between the hijras and the larger society, such as in police cases brought against them (Ibid: 410)
Seniority is the major principle of social organization in the hijra community, expressed in a hierarchy of *gurus* (teachers) and *chelas* (disciples). A particular guru must sponsor every hijra initiate. The *guru-chela* relationship combines aspects of those between parents and children, husbands and wives, and religious gurus and their disciples and thus has economic, emotional and spiritual dimensions. *Gurus* provide guidance, work and support for their *chelas*, and *chelas* owe obedience and loyalty, and part or all of their earnings, to their *gurus*. This relationship is also the basis for a network of kin-like relations, as a *guru’s guru* becomes a “grand-mother” and *chelas* of the same *guru* are “like sisters.”

The guru-chela organization is a very effective recruitment device. Any hijra who wishes and can financially afford it can become a guru (Gurus usually pays for the initiation expense). This immediately increases her prestige in the community, as well as her income, chelas always give something, in cash or kind, to their gurus. Thus, the hijras who can afford are always in the lookout for new recruits. This creates coercive nature to select and form guru-chela relationship. Gurus are always trying to maintain their investments in the chelas and they try to get permanent candidates for the group.

Through adopting many features of castes and kin, particularly control over members through control over their work hijras effectively adapt to the socio-economic environment of the places in our country where hijras are recognized. States laws allows in the north Indian states one hijras in each district hereditary rights to own land and rights to collect food and small sums of money from each household. These rights are protected and legitimately passed from guru to chela. With the arrival of the British the hijras lost their state recognition and the subsequent social breakup of the caste organization in the post independent period, the legitimacy of the hijras over their
state recognized legitimacy has suffered, still they are a group recognized by the devotees.

The hijra community compensated the decline in the income from the traditional ritual practices by prostitution. Although prostitution is discouraged in the hijra community, it is widely engaged in. Today, for the people the hijras have the duel image of prostitutes as well as boon granters. Defying the government ban on the hijras to exhort money, their begging has been extended to the trains and the public places. People give money some out of fear, others out of devotions and yet some others to get rid of them. In any case, the hijras seem to be flourishing and it is likely to continue unaffected.

4.3.2. “Thirunangai”

4.3.2.1. Ali - The Nomenclature

Ali means sex-less (without linga i.e. a + linga = Alī) are people who are being “neither nor” or “both at the same time” and none of the components exclusively. In the modern sense the third gender people. The Tamil term Ali actually group together individuals belonging to different forms and different grades of intensity of “neither nor” things they have in common being that they cannot be clearly defined as masculine or as feminine and are dedicated themselves to goddess. The recent discourses in the socio-cultural sphere of Tamil Nadu made the names “Aravani” and “Thirunangai” as the acceptable terminologies.

Thirunangai may be a simple transvestite, a eunuch, a transsexual, or a hermaphrodite of the same phenomenon as the hijras. The variation is mostly cultural.

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68 For the discussion of Thiruangiar, depended much from a write up by Ulrike Niklas in 1997 on a Documentary Project on Alī
The Yellamma Cult and their practitioners (jogappas – male practitioners) in Karnataka who gather in great number in villages during the annual festival of this deity is another example. These people, because of their proximity to Mumbay, are mixed with the hijras tradition. In the Northern Tamilnuadu there is another identical cult known as Kuthandavar-Vazhipadu (Kuthandavar Cult), which seems to be related to the Karnataka phenomenon.

Tolkappiyam the earliest Tamil grammar includes specific mention of persons “whose maleness is dormant” which according to the commentators signifies hermaphrodites with a clearly effeminate character. For them, as Tolkappiyam states, masculine forms are not applicable; hence, the commentators give examples using feminine endings with the verbs. The situation was complicated in the case of persons whose sex cannot be determined, or who are sex-less; for them neuter forms applied. In Malayalam language too there is a neuter form known as napumsakalingam indicting the recognition of a third sex in our Malayalee cult and culture. This indicates even at the time of Tolkappiyam and the beginning of Malayalam there existed a sizable number of people who were important enough to be treated as a separate group in grammar books.⁶⁹.

4.3.2.2. Why and How Does a Person Become a Thirunangai?

The reasons for becoming the Thirunangai is identical to that of Hijras. The reasons are several, however, mainly the desire that was already there in the childhood, secondly, the environment and thirdly the education. Position in the family is important aspect, having been the youngest son in the only male family the boy had to help with

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⁶⁹ Tolkappiyam: is a work on the grammar of the Tamil language and the earliest extant work of Tamil literature and linguistics. It is written in the form of noorpaa or short formulaic compositions and comprises three books – the Ezhuttadikaram, the Solladikaram and the Poruladikaram.
household-chores, which were normally considered female works. Having identified with the female role right from the childhood many find it difficult to come out to their “normal” male role.

The operation is done almost similar to that of the ‘hijras’ emasculation (Herddt year: 383). The person, who chooses to become a thirunangai, will normally go thought an initiating phase before he decides to get his body adapted to the mental process that he has gone through and made him prefer the female role. The surgery sometimes involves the use of drugs, and usually possession and trance, most probably a traditional means to cope with the severe pain. The wound is treated with hot oil and water, and the patient gets a strengthening diet for about 40 days after that he is dismissed.

4.3.2.3. The Socio-Economic Background of Thirunangai

Thirunangai come from the cross section of the Society. Some of them from very rich families, others from very poor houses, and quite a number come from middle class section. In the same way, there are Thirunangai who come from Brahmin families as well as from Scheduled caste. Moreover, there are Thirunangai of Muslim origin. Persons from all these different socio economic and religious backgrounds, once they join the “Thirunangai” community, do away with their previous identity and its social and religious rules. They adopt a new form of communal life, identical to the Hijras. They live in commune under a leader (Guru) from among themselves, and that they respect elder individuals in the same way as they would respect elder sisters, mothers and aunts. They also adopt a common religion and common religious rituals and cults with Vishnu-Mohini as the patron god (Ishtadevata).
4.3.2.4. *Thirunangai* Festival Myth

One episode found only in the Southern version of the Mahabharata is the story of how Vishnu transformed into a beautiful woman, Mohini, gets married to the young hero Aravan, who has been identified with the village-god Kuttandavar.

In the big war of eighteen days, in which the two clans ‘Pandava’ and ‘Kaurava’ opposed each other on the battle-field, none of the two could gain a decisive battle both were endowed with equal powers. Finally, the gods decided to interfere and made known that the clan in which a young hero would be ready to sacrifice his life in the following day’s battle, would win the war. Aravan, the son of Arjuna, who was the greatest hero among the Pandava, declared himself ready for this supreme sacrifice. He posed only one condition: being young and unmarried so far, he didn’t want to die as a bachelor. Hence, he demanded to be married that very night – But which father would be ready to give his daughter into marriage to someone who is surely to die the very next day?

So finally, Vishnu decided to help the Pandava: he took on his role as Mohini and married Aravan. The marriage took place during the night – and the next day, on the battlefield, the young bridegroom died, leaving Mohini behind as a widow.\(^{70}\)

It is this story, which is enacted repeatedly every year during the festivals at *Kuvakam* and *Pillaiyarkuppam* and in several more villages all over Tamilnadu and which is known as “Ali-festivals”. Though normal villagers and devotees participate with enthusiasm in this celebration, mainly *Thirunangaiaar* are the ones who come to the villages every year in great numbers, and sometimes from as far away as Mumbai.

\(^{70}\) Existing local myth collected during fieldwork
or Delhi. At least for Ali of Tamil origin, no matter where they settled at present, this festival appears to be the greatest event of the year.

4.3.2.5. Thirunangai Festival Ritual (Pillaiyarkuppam)

The village Pillaiyarkuppam possesses a small temple dedicated exclusively to Kuttandavar - Aravan in which every year a ten day-festival is held. The climax of this festival are the two last days, vernacularly called “Ali-Festival”. The first day, from about noon onwards, groups of “Thirunangai” start arriving. Every group has a traditional host in the village, in whose house arrangements are made for stay and food.

In the later afternoon, joyful singing and dancing starts in front of the Kuttandavar-temple: the “Thirunangai”, all of them wearing saris and female ornaments, dance round –dance normally performed only by women- and sing improvised songs (often with very erotic contents) in anticipation of the marriage-ceremony that is going to take place during the night and in which all of them, together with thousands of local villagers who participate in this rituals in fulfilment of the vows, will become brides of the god.

In the early morning of the next day, the god, now a married man will go round the village in a triumphant procession on a huge chariot in order to receive the offerings of the villagers. Betel, coconut, bananas, flowers, camphor-flames, here and there also cock are the main offerings. At about noon, the god arrives back in front of his temple.

At this moment, the whole atmosphere of the festival changes into its direct reverse. What was joyful before becomes sad, instead of the erotic songs, lamentations are chanted and laughter is replaced by tears and weeping. A sort of general mourning
hysteria spread everywhere the god as died on the battlefield, and all his brides are widows.

In a second procession, Kuttandavar is brought to the cremation-ground: a harvest field at the outskirts of the village- where the funeral rites are carried out. The Thirunangai now break their glass-bangles and tear off their marriage-badges. Then they leave the ground and go back to the village to dress in white saris as a sign of their widowhood. They come back as widows and burn the last remains of Kuttandavar (in this case the bushels of straw from which the body of the effigy was built, while the effigy's woodenhead is preserved), to this ceremony, women normally do not have access. The Thirunangai, all clad in their white saris, will leave the village the same night – the festival is over

4.4. Islam

4.4.1. Islam and Gay Sex World

Islam is probably the most rigidly anti-homosexual in its practices of all the world religions. The verses from the Quran condemning homosexuality are much clearer than those that the Christians use. In all Muslim countries and all areas where the Islamic Sharia law is enforced homosexuality is strictly illegal. All of Islam fits within the area of Christianity that we call "fundamentalist" with regards to sexuality. The debates in Islam about homosexuality are not about whether it is acceptable, but merely about how severe the punishment should be. So although there are liberal and strict elements within Islam with concern to homosexuality even the liberal opinion is the lesser of two evils. ("Homosexuality and Islam" by Vexen Crabtree 2002 Dec 07)

71 Collected from the field
"According to a pamphlet produced by Al-Fatiha, there is a consensus among Islamic scholars that all humans are naturally heterosexual. Homosexuality is seen by scholars to be a sinful and perverted deviation from the norm. All Islamic schools of thought and jurisprudence consider gay acts to be unlawful. They differ in terms of penalty: The Hanafite school (currently seen mainly in South and Eastern Asia) teaches that no physical punishment is warranted. The Hanabalites, (widely followed in the Arab world) teach that severe punishment is warranted. The Sha'fi school of thought (also seen in the Arab world) requires a minimum of 4 adult male witnesses before a person can be found guilty of a homosexual act.

Al-Fatiha estimates that 4,000 homosexuals have been executed in Iran since their revolution in 1979. 10 public executions of homosexuals have been performed in Afghanistan by the Taliban army.\(^{72}\)

The OCRT (Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance) also repeat statements from Western Islamic groups citing their opinions on homosexuality, and universally Muslims state that they consider homosexuality to be wrong.

"Dr. Muzammil Siddiqi of the ISNA [Islamic Society of North America] said:

"Homosexuality is a moral disorder. It is a moral disease, a sin and corruption... No person is born homosexual, just like no one is born a thief, a liar or murderer. People acquire these evil habits due to a lack of proper guidance and education."\(^{73}\)

Since the 1700s Islam has been strongly homophobic, perhaps influenced by colonization by European powers (Gay_Charlotte.com). In general, throughout its history, Islam has been very tolerant. There are verses in the Qur’an, which suggest that

\(^{72}\) Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance webpage at [www.religioustolerance.org/hom_isla.htm](http://www.religioustolerance.org/hom_isla.htm).

\(^{73}\) Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance webpage at [www.religioustolerance.org/hom_isla.htm](http://www.religioustolerance.org/hom_isla.htm).
homosexual activity is unacceptable to Allah; these verses are open to dispute, and each queer Muslim must decide for them what they really mean. It must be noted that there are Islamic scholars, both past and present, who have different opinions on this subject, some accepting, others rejecting. It should also be noted that much previous material written on this subject refers to male rape, or the rape of young boys, and not necessarily homosexuality as we understand it today.

The seven Tips on talking to kids about homosexuality (info@soundvision.com) is a clear indication of homophobia

4.4.2. Seven Tips on Talking to Kids About Homosexuality

“And Lot! (Remember) when he said unto his folk: Will ye commit abomination such as no creature ever did before you?

Lo! ye come with lust unto men instead of women. Nay, but ye are wanton folk.” (Quran: 7:80-81)

Homosexuality has gained greater acceptance as an “alternative lifestyle” in the last 20 to 30 years in North America. Not only has this mentality affected adults - it is now affecting kids' way of looking at the gay lifestyle as well.

Public school sex education, under the rubric of “Family Life Education” generally teaches an acceptance of homosexuality, a respect and/or tolerance for it. As is the case with sex education in general, there is little to no moral guidance on the topic. Just a neutral presentation.
Homosexuality, like others matters pertaining to sexuality, is openly discussed in the Quran and Sunnah. We have no excuse as Muslim parents, teachers, community leaders and individuals not to clearly discuss this issue with our kids.

In view of this, Sound Vision has asked Muslim counsellor Shahina Siddiqui, Islamic activist and author Ahmad Sakr, and former Islamic school principal Abdalla Idris Ali how Muslims can discuss the issue of homosexuality from the Islamic perspective. Below are some of their suggestions.

**Tip #1: Clearly outline what is homosexual behaviour**

This can be uncomfortable, but a young Muslim, even one who attends Islamic school, most probably has heard about homosexuality from television, newspapers, radio, and/or non-Muslim friends.

This is also important because in many Muslim cultures, it is not uncommon to find people of the same sex kissing on the cheeks, hugging, or holding hands. None of these actions are deemed sexual in any way. Therefore, this is why a child must not confuse real Halal affection between his brothers or her sisters, versus deviant sexual behaviour.

In this regard, it may help to read up on the topic a bit before venturing to explain what it is.

**Tip #2: Tell them what Islam says about homosexuality, with wisdom**

To just say it is Haram, will not usually satisfy Muslim children, especially those who are used to questioning, discussion, and debate.
One point that has to be emphasized is that since Allah is the Creator of human beings, ‘Who’ created us out of nothing, He knows best what our true needs and desires are. He also knows what is good and bad for us. He sees everything, knows everything and is the wisest and most Merciful. Therefore, the fact that He is telling us that homosexuality is wrong, just as He tells us consuming alcohol is wrong, for example, means that we must heed His warning.

One of the main aims of sex is to produce children in order to continue human life. Homosexuality does not yield any children. It is a relationship purely for the sake of pleasure, which is not only unnatural, but leads to disease and death.

**Tip #3: Get them to write a paper or do an assignment about it**

If Aminah or Saeed are in their teens, get them to research the topic and write a paper on homosexuality, suggests Idris Ali. Provide books that give the Islamic perspective. This is a good way for them to grasp the concept, and who knows, maybe in the course of their research they will find another good reason homosexuality should not be practiced.

**Tip #4: Make it clear people are not born that way**

“We're born that way, so deal with it,” is the mantra of a number of gays. This is not true.

“They are putting the blame on God,” says Sakr. “If it is true, why in the world does God have to send an earthquake to the people of Lot in [the northern] part of Palestine, because they were the first group of people who started committing homosexuality.”
If people were born to commit homosexual acts, Allah who is most Merciful, would not have destroyed Prophet Lut's community. These people had an opportunity to change. They did not, and Allah destroyed them. This is a test Shaytan (Satan) puts in our way.

**Tip #5: Make the distinction between desires and actions**

It should be noted that some people may have the desire to engage in homosexual sex, but that does not mean they have acted on that. In Islam the punishment is for the act, not the feelings. Allah does not hold us responsible for our bad thoughts as long as we don't act on them.

A Muslim who develops homosexual desires, but does not act on them must fast and seek the sincere help and guidance of Allah to turn away from this lifestyle. S/he must also not dwell on these kinds of thoughts. Which leads to the next point.

**Tip #6: Emphasize the importance of Islamic practice in keeping these desires away**

The only way we can truly protect ourselves from homosexuality, whether it is in the development of feelings, or in the actual sexual practice of it is to always remember Allah.

This means following the basics: prayers, fasting, Dua, etc. Even the basics done sincerely and regularly can, Insha Allah, provide a fortress against Shaytan.

Sakr says fasting in particular, is useful in controlling lust, and recommends doing so on Mondays and Thursdays. As well, we can point out that if a person is
having these desires, it can be a test from Allah, as well as an example of how Shaytan tries to turn us away from Allah.

In addition, we should advise ourselves and our kids to seek refuge in Allah from Shaytan by saying ‘Aoutho billahi minash Shaytan ir Rajeem’ (I seek refuge in Allah from Shaytan the accursed) as well as reading Surah al Nas, the last Surah of the Quran, which mentions the whispering of Shaytan.

**Tip #7: Emphasize the importance of and maintain Islamic rules of modesty, even with the same sex**

How many of us watch television shows replete with sexual foreplay, titillation and innuendo? These types of “innocent” displays of sexuality are dangerous, to say the least. They put wrong ideas into the mind and are Haram for us to watch.

This is where lowering the gaze comes in. As well, maintaining an Islamic dress code even in front of the same sex, is important. In Islam, for example, a man cannot see the body of another man between the naval and knees.

Contrast this with high school gym classes, where boys will often shower together, usually in complete nudity. The same happens in girls' locker rooms. Parents and Muslim communities must be on guard against these types of situations, which are not only dangerous to a young Muslim's Islamic practice, but can also make them the prey of gays and/or lesbians.

Another practice relating to modesty between brothers and sisters is to have separate beds or bedrooms for brothers and sisters, especially after the age of 10. Care should also be given to respecting the privacy of both the same and opposite gender
when changing clothes for example, or in the shower. Permission should be sought before entering a room, where someone may be in a state of undress.

The 7 tips are emphasising moral codes on desired sexual behaviours from youth. The tips are highlighting the moral values to be followed as part of the religious belief system

4.4.3. Homosexuality in Saudi Arabia

Gay sexual practices are sexual activities involving men who have sex with men (MSM), regardless of their sexual orientation or sexual identity. The authors of the 1948 Kinsey Reports state that 37% of their male subjects had had at least one homosexual experience. Evidence shows that sex between men is significantly underreported in surveys due to social desirability bias. The following is an example on how gay sex operates even in a country with very strict religious moral value systems

I worked in Saudi - Riyadh for 2 years. On my first visit to Riyadh I stayed in hotel in the middle of Riyadh. I am married, but gay. With all the stories about the muttawa and gays, I was so scared to make my preference known. Or even tried to look around for men.

Well, big was my surprise, when I went to the health club the first day I was in Riyadh. In came this handsome Lebanese guy into the sauna. He gave me one look and smiled. We started to chat, and it wasn't long, before he showed me his erection! I was absolutely delighted with the hand lady luck dealt me. Before any hesitation, we went to his room and what happened is anyone's guess.
I then moved to another hotel, closer to the office. Once again, I went to the sauna, and big was my surprise that you can pick and choose among 80% of the guys, western and Arab. They are ALL gay. It is so easy, so available!!

This is where I met my lover. We both are married, but so in love. And this is going on for more than 2 years now. He introduced me to the gay scene in Riyadh. Not that you need to be discreet about it. Not at all. In all the coffee shops, malls, hotel lobbies, health clubs, and barber shops - you can find the man of your dreams everywhere!! Of course you need to be aware of the muttawa, but with the social behaviour of Arab male, you can go anywhere with a man. The culture is so male orientated, that nobody will frown upon you if you hold hands, touch or even kiss on the cheeks, sometimes lips!!

Riyadh is paradise for a gay person!

As I said, our love affair is strong and we are going for more than 2 years now. Unfortunately I had to move to Oman. The mere thought of him being in Riyadh, and all the available men (we only met other men when we were together for 3 somes!), is driving me crazy. He can find men on every corner!!

Well, I suppose time will tell!

But all of you wondering about Saudi, - as I said, it is heaven for gays!! (© Gay Middle East.com News)

4.4.4. Gay Movements in Islam

Is gay sex permissible? When two consenting adults love each other and want to share their love physically, one can reasonably doubt its supposed "sinfulness", but this
is a very personal matter best left to the individual conscience. Love and relationship are healing and can help people become psychologically healthy and content -- sin does just the opposite. There are many benefits to love and healthy sexuality, and none at all to its opposite. Refusing Queer Muslims the right to love and be loved is, to some of us, a much larger "sin" because its consequences are so destructive all the way around. Even so, there are some of us who take a much more conservative view and refrain from sexual activities. Ultimately it is up to each gay person to decide how best to reconcile their sexual needs with what the Qur'an teaches, and to examine their own behaviour and motives and determine the purity of their own intentions.

Queer Jihad is the Queer Muslim struggle for acceptance: first, the struggle to accept ourselves as being exactly the way Allah has created us to be; and secondly, the struggle for acceptance and tolerance among Muslims in general. 'Jihad' is a misunderstood word: to the educated Muslim, it denotes the struggle with one's self, one's nags, one baser, lower instincts, the struggle to do good, to be good, to put into practice the beliefs and values we claim to possess. Only in a secondary, technical sense does it mean 'holy war'. Thus, the 'queer jihad' is our own struggle with sexuality, with accepting it and dealing with it, and moving on.

If those who submit to Allah are sincere, they must recognize Allah's will: And such a will creates homosexuality, including homosexual people and homosexual animals, and it is not therefore the Muslims' prerogative to question this or condemn it.

"Islamists deny human rights to gays. An attempt by the United Nations to include gay people in anti-discrimination measures is being derailed by a coalition of Islamic countries. UN sources said that Pakistan, Egypt, Libya, Saudi Arabia and Malaysia were doing everything in their power to stop the resolution. They hope to
delay the vote long enough to kill it off entirely. Secretary of the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association in Britain, George Broadhead, commented that all Muslim countries outlawed homosexuality, and the penalties for those convicted ranged from prison, flogging, execution by a variety of perverted methods – such as throwing the victim off a cliff or pushing a stone wall on to them. "The record of these countries on human rights in general is bad enough, but when it comes to gay human rights, they are disgusting” (Vexen Crabtree, 2002 Dec 07, 134)

4.5. Christianity

4.5.1. Religious Life

In the first millennium loosely defined group of castrated men played key roles in society performing courtly, ceremonial, religious and other roles. Christian teachings disapproved the practice while applauding its outcome – permanent celibacy.

The eunuchs were thought to lack mental stability, quick tempered and to lack self-control. The one common characteristic of the eunuchs was their changeable nature. Because of the changing nature, the eunuchs are said to be complicated, intricate and difficult to understand. In an aristocratic society in which gender was strictly bi-polar and emotional expressions were strictly prescribed, the eunuchs were believed to be able to change their mental set up and share attributes of two genders. This perception probably contributed to the belief that eunuchs possessed special magical powers. They were also called magicians (Herdt, 1994:92)

Eunuchs were regarded with awe and suspicion, may be because they retained some traits of boys and incapable of wasting their vital essence in procreation and most certainly they were well educated and engaged in professions and activities others did
not understand. The look of the eunuchs was important, the boys, eunuchs and angels are mistaken for one another; all have the same appearance and are incapable of generating offspring.

In a society, which followed strictly, the male-female bi-polarity there was a linguistic problem of describing the ‘third gender’. In the linguistic descriptions, the eunuchs were referred to using the negative opposites such as fainthearted, unfruitful, immoderate, unmanly, and diminutive. “They are unkind, ungenerous, and they suffer from weakness. Eunuchs are harsh, offensive, hard to manage, difficult, unpopular and unpleasant.” (Herdt, 1994: 93)

The sexual definitions of eunuchs in the first millennium were inconsistent and ambiguous. Still, they were thought to be a distinct gender, physically, both male and female and mentally changeable. These attributes were directly related to castration.

Despite the linguistic constraints as in our times, the 1st millennium Europe eunuchs constituted a “third gender”. They were excluded from male and female procreative roles and thus could not be recognized as either. They were assigned many social roles that could not be accepted by neither men nor women as the roles were gendered. They also lived with a convention that attributed to them non-aristocratic. (Herdt, 1994: 94).

Byzantine times when the eunuchs assumed “third gender” roles prescriptions made for their appearance and gait. Eunuchs were reared regularly, and formed to be of graceful and well made. Eunuchs were gifted to dignitaries in herds to win their favour. They served in court and in the great houses of the city. At court, eunuchs also wore a distinctive costume. (Herdt, 1994: 95)
Gendering involves the assignment of specific and often exclusive roles in society. Many of these roles were considered to be non-masculine or else involved tasks that were performed by women outside an aristocratic society. At court eunuchs acted as masters of ceremonies, controlling access to the emperors; as doorkeepers; as servants in charge of traditionally female activities like cooking, serving and care of the wardrobe. They were also trained for tasks such as bookkeeping managing money and speculating in real estate. Certain positions at courts were reserved for the eunuchs. They served as the go between the court and the outside world. They acted as trusted secretaries. They served as singers at court. They were very much involved in marriage ceremonies and prepared the dead for burial. They were also barbers, and doctors.

Both the emperor and the empress each had his or her own corps of household eunuchs. In the palace, they fulfilled female roles as caregivers, and even sexual partners to the emperor. Since they owned their education to the emperor and adopted his nature, they were judged more worthy of honours than others. They concealed the shame of their fate from people’s opinion. They spoke and acted like freedmen and they were lavish with their wealth and abundant in their good works, and showed other gentlemanly qualities. When women held the throne, eunuchs became trusted political advisers and powerful administers well before the tenth century they had acquired roles far beyond their much older functions as guardians of the harem. (Herdt, 1994: 96)

5.2. Eunuchs as Intermediaries and as Protagonists

Many of the roles and functions ascribed to eunuchs involved mediations and transactions across boundaries, especially those charged with religious elements or supernatural powers. Regulating access to the emperor, ‘human-god’, protecting the sacred space around him. Mediating, brokering and transmitting messages also was
entrusted to them. Medical work and caring for the dead also required that eunuchs mediate between this world and the powers of the supernatural. Finally, there are numerous parallels between eunuchs as go-betweens and angels as messengers. This suggests that eunuchs mediated between the world of immediate reality and the world of imagination or nether world. The eunuchs generally occupied space in society as well as terrain in life assumed exclusively theirs.

Some of them occupied powerful positions in society, which in contemporary others societies occupied by ‘whole men’. Court eunuchs also frequently appeared in important positions normally held by males in the army and the navy. A few of them performed so well that their contemporaries wondered as saying, “a eunuch raised in the women’s quarters and accustomed to a soft life could overcome his inherent traits and command so successfully.” (Herdt, 1994: 97)

Eunuchs were often male prostitutes and were criticized for “talking dirty”, dressing in a “disorderly” manner and for pretending to be men. Eunuchs also frequently appeared as physicians or teachers, professions occupied by educated slaves in the Roman world and requiring intimacy with men, women and children. The image of castrated men often facilitated this intimacy.

By the eleventh century, as the power of the great aristocratic families grew and aristocratic male values such as personal courage and personal military skill, the influence of eunuchs dwindled considerably. Some of the roles that endured were singing in the Church, playing female role in theatre. The later traditions would last until the nineteenth century.
4.5.3. The Church and Eunuchs

Christianity and the Church constituted a central force in the dynamic process of changing the understanding of the institution of eunuchs. Over time, lay society changed the way it defined eunuchs giving physiologically specific connotations. The Christian religious rationales and practices created an alternative hierarchy of status for men. The procreative ability as standards for masculinity was replaced by moral worth and celibacy, in the context of the rejection of sexual desire (Herdt, 1994: 99).

Throughout the history of Byzantium, eunuchs occupied places at all levels of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. They were monks, priests, bishops and church officials. Rather than a preoccupation with the male ideal and procreation, the secular society’s ideal of masculinity, the clerical discussion of eunuchs tended to focus on their relationship to the ideal of celibacy. Because of their physical castration, eunuchs in the Church became natural celibates. Yet ecclesiastical sources frequently suggest that, in the struggle for ascetic virtue, eunuchs were not able to attain fully the celibate ideal. That is, celibacy was too easy for them because they did not have to struggle to attain it. Rather, they had achieved celibacy through the outside intervention of castration.

There was long debate on the interpretation of the biblical text Matthew 19/12, “For while some are eunuchs from birth, others are made eunuchs by men, and others have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of Heaven”. There were differences between theologians and scholars. There was uneasiness about the eunuchs, who had not to struggle with their own sexuality, to be declared as full-fledged celibates. At the same time, however, there was never any suggestion that castrated men lacked the qualities of gender necessary for sanctity, priesthood or high office in the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Nor were castrated churchmen ever presented as members...
of a third sex or gender category. Castrated eunuchs in the Church salvation could be more difficult but not impossible. The popular belief was that achieving celibacy was easy for castrated men and the assumed association of eunuchs with sin. The eunuchs were associated with professions perceived as immoral, outcast or sinful by both the Church and society. The worldliness of the eunuchs were despised. Eunuchs were also associated with women in various ways that involved physical proximity, physical nature and social roles, and thus were suspect in masculine world. Finally, they were also associated with the courtly and aristocratic world of power.

At the end of the evolution of the understanding of eunuchs in the religious world of the 1st millennium Europe, with its orientation towards celibacy and the ascetic, did not place eunuchs in the sort of limbo that was part of their distinctive gender in secular society. With some reservations, the eunuchs could aspire to the same spiritual and celibate ideal and high positions, as could other ‘normal’ men. Since the Church was a world that excluded procreation for manliness and promoted celibacy, eunuchs could be accommodated.

In the twelfth century, there was heated debate for against eunuchs becoming religious in the Church. During debate one interesting concept emerged, namely, “people born lacking in desire”, in today’s understanding the ‘third gender’. That is, people physically whole men with opposite sex orientations. This, however, was not followed up further in the Church religious circle. The Church authorities emerged as the strongest critic of third gender, while it almost sustains and maintains itself on the third gender practices, known as religious life. Church’s concern appeared to be only physical mutilation or deform of the genitals. Theoretically, the last category of people, in the biblical saying of Jesus,”…others made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the
Kingdom of Heaven” was emphasized while the other categories also merrily accommodated to make the Christian men religious life a haven for the gay and the women religious life a haven for the lesbian women.

In the Defence of eunuchs the author argues, “Eunuchs are men and that the presence or absence of reproductive organs should not be the measure of manliness.” He suggests, “Society has recognized two complementary paths, or ladders, to male perfection. He acknowledges, “the traditional ladder that referenced gender definition to an aristocratic male ideal…there is an equally valid path referenced to the ideal of the celibate and spiritual male. In such a mental world reproductive organs simply have a generative function, and if that function is irrelevant or unwanted then the useless material can be removed like a superfluous digit or branch on a fruit tree.” (Herdt, 1994:108)

“In this way Christianity and the Church created a ladder of status and perfection that, while it remained oriented to a male ideal (only men could be priests, after all), had rendered procreation irrelevant. Thus, a key component (the ability to procreate) of the complex of factors that led to the construction of a distinct gender for eunuchs in secular and court society had been eliminated in the religious realm”. (Herdt, 1994)

The ecclesiastical community is defining manliness in a new way – in terms of spiritual perfection rather than physical or reproductive ability. For the Church eunuchs are neither a third sex nor a third gender; they are simply men. For the rest of the society eunuchs continue to be defined as incomplete men.

The Christian theological, philosophical and spiritual traditions gradually effected a change in the definitions of both male sexuality and gender. During the
classical period masculinity was determined by procreative ability and active sexual roles. Eunuchs, especially those who lacked masculine biological traits, were despised. With the development of the ascetic life and the rejection of sexuality and procreation as defining elements, eunuchs became less ambiguous in the Church. Within the Church, however, a man who was castrated as a child and reared within the Church could achieve a high degree of social acceptance.

Interestingly, the three religious vows, Chastity, Poverty, and Obedience are the three powers enjoyed by the eunuchs in the courts in the 1st millennium. The Eunuchs were celibates by birth. Without offspring, they enjoyed unlimited wealth and worldliness pleasures in the court. As commanders, accountants and the guardians of the scared space around the king, they wielded unrestraint power. The eunuchism of the 1st millennium is transferred to the religious life of the Catholic Church today with a face lifting ‘checks and balances’ in the name of asceticism.

4.5.4. The Church and Priestly Celibacy

The priesthood in the Catholic Church the main denomination of the Christian Churches is a product of Byzantine understanding of masculinity. Only men celibates can be the catholic priests. The justification is the biblical explanation that Jesus was unmarried (Jesus died at the age of 33) and saying of Jesus in Matthew 19/12, “those made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of Heaven”.

The eunuchs of the Bible were usually castrated males or those incapable of reproduction due to a birth defect. A eunuch could also be someone who performed work typical of eunuchs, although he remained perfectly capable of having sex—i.e., “eunuch” in some cases was simply a title. The purpose of intentional castration was to induce impotence and remove sexuality. It was a common practice in ancient times for
rulers to castrate some of their servants and/or advisers in order to subdue and pacify them. It was especially common to castrate men who tended the royal harem. Queen Esther’s eunuchs are mentioned in Esther 4:4.

In Matthew 19:12, Jesus mentions eunuchs in the context of whether it is good to marry. He says, “There are eunuchs who were born that way, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others—and there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it.” Jesus identifies three types of “eunuchs” here: natural eunuchs (“born that way”), forced eunuchs (“made eunuchs by others”), and voluntary eunuchs (“those who choose”).

Natural eunuchs include those who are born with a physical defect, but they also comprise those who are born with no real desire for marriage or sex. Forced eunuchs are those who have been castrated for whatever reason. Voluntary eunuchs are those who, in order to better serve the Lord in some capacity, choose to forego marriage. God calls some people to remain single (and therefore celibate). Paul speaks of those who serve the Lord in their unmarried state in 1 Corinthians 7:7—9.

Some gay groups argue that Jesus was referring to homosexuals when He mentioned eunuchs who were “born that way.” However, the Bible never uses the words homosexual and eunuch interchangeably. Furthermore, eunuchs are never referred to in Scripture as being in sin, while homosexuality is universally condemned in both the Old and New Testaments.
Pope Francis on Homosexuality

The Catholic Church’s stance on gay rights continues to be a source of confusion, as official acceptance of LGBT (footnote) people emerges on a seemingly intermittent basis.

Following the recent synod, Pope Francis has again spoken out about homosexuals – as he said the Catholic Church must help parents to stand by their gay children. But at the same time he maintained that gay marriage was still not on the Church’s agenda. The seemingly contradictory statements came in an interview published just a day after Francis urged the Church’s top theologians to listen to what ordinary Catholics have to say and pay attention to the “signs of the times”.

Speaking to La Nacion, the Pope said that leaders had a duty to help “famil[ies] to deal with that somewhat unusual situation”.

“What we did talk about was of how a family with a homosexual child, whether a son or a daughter, goes about educating that child, how the family bears up, how to help that family to deal with that somewhat unusual situation,” he said.

“That is to say, the synod addressed the family and the homosexual persons in relation to their families, because we come across this reality all the time in the confessional: a father and a mother whose son or daughter is in that situation. This happened to me several times in Buenos Aires.

“We have to find a way to help that father or that mother to stand by their son or daughter.”

But he said that “nobody mentioned homosexual marriage” at the synod because “it did not cross our minds”. In October Hungarian Cardinal Peter Erdo read out an interim report at the Synod’s General Congregation, which declared homosexuals had “gifts and qualities to offer”. However, conservative bishops distanced themselves from the statement and the Church has since said it is simply a “working document” and was not intended to be an official statement of church teaching on family life. Francis told La Nacion that the synod was a “process” and stated: “The opinion of a synodal father was just that, the opinion of a synodal father.”

4.6. Conclusion

For centuries in the second millennium the existence of a third gender category of people have been dismissed from reports and studies, while the Western European tradition marginalized, stigmatized and persecuted them. This dismissal of a reality that has been known in history is due to the western bias. In India, the third gender category who succeeded in making their own socio-economic basis and strong religious ordering and network survived in spite of the western onslaught, while it went underground in pockets where western education and patriarchal Semitic religions dominated. Kerala is one such pocket where the people are not even aware of a third gender category while more than 25% of the sample had gay sex experience at least once in their life. This, indeed, the reason for the high level of MSM stigma and discrimination in Kerala.

In Anthropology, the encounter with the traditional societies, especially the exotic cultures of non-western world, myriad examples of divergent sexualities and gendered classifications have emerged over the past century. Among Native American tribe, third gender persons were variously known as Winkte, Hemanch and Nadle in different tribes. The French settlers and explorers referred to them as Berdache. In the
country of Oman, they are called Xanth. Among the Muslims of Mombasa, Kenya, such individuals are called Washoga. Still, when it comes discussions of ‘normal’ people and their sexuality, that is, when it comes to thinking about whether there are only two sexes and genders in the nature of human groups these groups are ignored. The neglect is largely due to the intellectual, social and morally defined structures of sexual bi-polarity promoted by the western world and its religions. The history of homosexuality and particularly the gay sex adequately illustrates the need for a radical rethinking about the bi-sexual definition of human nature and sexuality. The various third gender groups in India particularly, the Hijras and Thirunangai offer a great challenge to the strict bi-polar definition imposed by the western culture and morality.

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