



SOCIETY



NIGEL MAITHLIN

Guyana's Hindus Face Gay Quandry

When a constitutional amendment proposed to end discrimination against homosexuals, Guyanese Hindus asked themselves, "Where do we stand?"

By VIDYARATHA KISSOON
GEORGETOWN, GUYANA

IF MODERN SCIENCE IS RIGHT—AND SOMETIMES IT IS—there are more than 50 million homosexual and bisexual people in India, 15 million in the US and 30,000 in Guyana. The role, aspirations and rights of this large segment of society (and, in the minds of some, their wrongs) is a hot topic throughout this tropical nation. Guyanese Hindus, nearly one third of the population, are pondering: is there a unifying Hindu view on homosexuality?

The beautiful republic of Guyana, nestled on the lush northeastern coast of South America, is a young nation solidifying its identity. After being ruled by the Dutch, the Spanish and finally the British, the country achieved independence in 1966, becoming the only South American state in the Commonwealth.

Guyana's ethnic heritage is varied—mostly Indian and African, but also Native American, European and Chinese. It is a nation of many peoples and traditions finding their way toward harmony, and its laws reflect

this process. Revisions and amendments to the constitution are relatively common.

In January, 2001, the Congress of Guyana voted to pass a constitutional amendment that would forbid discrimination based on sexual orientation. However, this amendment never became law; the president, Bharrat Jagdeo (a Hindu), succumbed to intense pressure and did not sign it. This left in place legislation which is a legacy of the British colonial period—legislation which criminalizes consensual same-sex activity and cross-dressing. The United Kingdom

We belong: Hindu activists meet at the Organization of American States, in a search for equality

used mostly religious arguments; therefore, the numbers of the country's faithful play a decisive role. Guyana's population is 57% Christian (17% Pentecostal, 8% Roman Catholic, 7% Anglican, 25% other denominations), 28% Hindu and 9% Sunni Muslim.

Most Protestants opposed the constitutional change, while the Catholic Church officially supported it. Muslim groups were mostly either silent or against the proposal. Hindus remained largely neutral or undecided.

Several religious organizations, mostly of Abrahamic faiths, took a dual stance. While admitting that people have diverse sexual orientations, they expressed concern that the anti-discrimination amendment would eventually lead to the legalization of same-sex marriage, a prospect they abhor. Supporters of the amendment tried to assuage those fears, pointing out that the proposed law preserves the constitutional definition of marriage and family laws. The amendment did include a provision to recognize a common-law relationship, a step below marriage, for both heterosexual and homosexual couples.

Hindu institutions were almost absent from the 2001 debate, except for a joint statement issued by a few organizations—the Guyana Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha, Guyana Maha Kali Organisation, Gandhi Youth Bhavan and the Guyana Sevashram Sangh—stating that "sexual intercourse, an image of God's own power of creation, should be practiced only within the context of marriage between members of the opposite sex." It said nothing about legal discrimination.

Individual Hindus made more pertinent statements. Mr. Vidyanand Persaud, the representative for Hindu organizations on the Constitution Reform Commission, supported the motion, reminding others that

"Guyana's international treaty obligations encompassing civil and political rights enjoin the government not to discriminate on the grounds of sexual orientation."

A second opportunity to pass the law came in May, 2003, when the constitution was undergoing other reforms. The amendment bill reached the Parliament, but there was no vote; the National Assembly deferred the discussion to a constitutional committee, effectively placing it in a legal limbo.

National Pride

In truth, more was at play than just the rights of a class of people. National pride became a complicating issue when some people started saying that acceptance of homosexuality was a Western imposition on Guyana. Just last year, in 2010, this idea was summarized by Cabinet spokesperson and head of the Presidential Secretariat Dr. Roger Luncheon: the "government is unlikely to tamper with legislating homosexual activity and cross-dressing. For these issues to be addressed, the government must be convinced that it would be the desire of the people of Guyana and not an agenda being foisted on society by the developed world."

Also in 2010, Guyana participated in the United Nations' Periodic Review of Human Rights, which resulted in recommendations that the government repeal all laws which criminalize consensual same-sex activity. Former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, speaking in November, 2010, said that Guyana's "discriminatory laws and prevailing homophobic practices prevent gay men from accessing the health services" and called for the repeal of those laws. But as of January, 2011, those colonial-era discriminatory laws remain still in full force.

Hindu Perspectives

Guyana is a religiously plural and tolerant country. Freedom of worship is a constitutional right, and each of the main groups has its national holiday: Christmas, Diwali and the last day of Ramadan.

itself repealed such legislation in 1967, but most former colonies retained these Victorian laws. It was only in 2009, for instance, that India's Supreme Court ruled that its anti-gay laws were unconstitutional.

Guyana's proposed 2001 constitutional amendment would not have repealed Guyana's laws that make homosexual activity a felony. But it would have, for example, protected an employee from being fired simply because he or she is homosexual. Despite its modest goal, the anti-discrimination amendment has been languishing for a decade.

Opposition and Another Chance

The debate is complicated by the country's many cultures and religions and their varied views on morality and justice. Who was adamantly opposed to ending discrimination in Guyana? Large groups are not homogeneous, of course. But those against the amendment





Hindu organizations are strong and numerous, some of them dating back to the early 20th century: Arya Samaj, Guyana Sevashram Sangh (a branch of the Bharat Sevashram Sangh), Sathya Sai Baba association, Guyana Hindu Dharmic Sabha, Guyana Maha Kali Organisation, Guyana Pandits' Council, Guyana Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha and the Gandhi Youth Bhavan. Beautiful mandirs adorn cities and villages, serving as centers for worship and *seva*, selfless service. Hindu festivals are widely celebrated.

But community debate has uncovered a simple truth: there is no unified policy in Hinduism about homosexuality. In general, the matter is ruled by common sense, wisdom and tradition. But tradition can be a fluid concept, widely dependent on regional practices and collective memory; it shifts from generation to generation. One example is the strong influence of prudish British thought on Hindu morals in the last few centuries (see sidebar below).

"Indian culture has always had multiple expressions of gender identity and sexual orientation," says Pandit Deodat Tillack, priest at the Shri Samayapuram Mariamma Temple. "The major festivals around Lord Aravan and the worship of Bahucharia Mata, called Murgi Mata in Guyana, reflect these views," he claims. The festivals to Lord Aravan, a favorite of the third-sex *hijra* in India, who attend en masse; Lord Krishna is believed to have assumed the form of Mohini to marry Aravan as a reward for his dedication. Bahucharia Mata is a patron Goddess of the *hijra* community.

Pandit Tillack's views are echoed by many in Guyana. His colleague Pandit Rajin Bal-



VIDYARATHA KISSOON



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COURTESY PANDIT BALGOBIND



COURTESY PANDIT TILLACK

gobind feels that non-heterosexuals, who often question why they were born that way, should recognize that their sexual orientation is part of who they are. "Hindu scriptures do not discriminate against people; we are to be respected as our own decision makers. Everyone, including homosexual people, should lead disciplined lives that fulfill dharma, contribute to the well being of their society and do no harm to anyone." In Balgobind's opinion, sexual orientation falls into the category of *kama* (pleasure), one of the four goals of life, called *purusharthas*.

Other equally qualified religious leaders hold differing views. In an article in the local newspaper *Stabroek News*, Pandit Dhane-sar of the Guyana Central Arya Samaj stated that "according to the *Vedas*, any form of ab-

Pandits, priests and sevaks: (clockwise from top right) Amar Ramessar, president of the Yuva Shakti Sangh; Pandit Deodat Tillack, priest at the Shri Samayapuram Mariamma Temple; Pandit Rajin Balgobind of the Hindu Society of Berbice; Keeran Persaud, president of the Cummings Lodge Industry Hindu Society

normal sex is not right. Since homosexual sexual intercourse does not bring forth children it should not be permitted." Pandit Dhane-sar was not able to provide a reference explaining where in the *Vedas* one could find that dictum; he explained that a pandit's training is largely oral, often bypassing written sources.

The Inter-Religious Organisation, an interfaith body that represents some of Guyana's religious organizations, spoke against the anti-discrimination law. It officially supported the view that acceptance of homosexuality is a Western imposition on Guyana. But Swami Aksharananda, one of its co-chairpersons, vehemently disagreed. Swami—a founder of the Hindu Swayam-sevak Sangh in Guyana, the principal of the Saraswati Vidya Niketan and a Ph.D. in Hindu Studies from the University of Madison, Wisconsin—wrote an energetic rebuke: "We have to be concerned about what is glibly and uncritically invoked to be the position of scriptures on homosexuality. There is hardly any consensus here. While it is true that some religious books consider homosexuality as an abomination, Hinduism, for example, offers a much more nuanced and sophisticated perspective on the matter. Hinduism admits a wide range of sexual orientation



possibilities. Therefore, the stridency with which the Inter-Religious Organisation has expressed its anti-homosexual sentiments cannot be shared by Hindus." (Read his Op-Ed on page 64.)

Impacting Personal Lives

The lives of tens of thousands are deeply affected by these discussions. For Guyanese who are gay or lesbian, the reactions of society define their self-image and influence their comfort with who they are. The old, colonial-era laws impose an onerous choice: in order to be a law-abiding citizen in Guyana, a homosexual must observe lifelong celibacy. The alternative is to willfully violate the laws of the land and risk being arrested and charged with a felony.

Religion, ethnicity and social traditions strongly shape the identity of each Guyanese. Religious people who are homosexual wish to retain their religious ties. But even if a homosexual person feels comfortable with his or her faith, the acceptance of society still plays a large role. One of the gay men interviewed recognizes that the Hindu religion advocates tolerance, but he dares not test it in practice. "Many negative stereotypes of gay and lesbian people lead to prejudices," he said. Another gay Hindu man, who also declined to be identified, says, "I have suffered a lot of pain in trying to live an ethical life, while not being able to sustain any personal relationships. I feel out of place in Hindu settings, where I am always under the threat of being rejected; but I also feel out of place in gay settings which do not share my spiritual values."

According to Pandit Tillack, "Many gay and lesbian Hindus enter into heterosexual marriages to please society, sowing distress and future sorrow." This is confirmed by one of the gay men interviewed, who expressed his strong desire to have a family: "My dilemma is wanting children and a family, but how could I fulfill my marriage duties with

Hindu presence: The distinctively Indian architecture of Guyanese temples is a common sight

a woman?"

The criminalization of their actions is a heavy burden on homosexuals in Guyana. Many of them have otherwise conservative ideas about family and relationships, aspiring to monogamous long-term commitments and living together. Pushed to the shadows, most seek their happiness in secret, hoping to avoid legal consequences through leniency, anonymity or luck.

Outcome

There is no consensus yet in the Hindu community, but the strongest voices supporting the anti-discrimination law have come from Hindus. Swamis, pandits and local leaders are finding common ground—not in supporting homosexuality, but in denouncing society's oppression of that minority.

Keeran Persaud is a community leader, president of the Cummings Lodge Industry Hindu Society and a *sevak* of the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh. Active in helping the gay and lesbian communities, he advocates acceptance: "Hinduism calls on its followers to be compassionate, by educating themselves to overcome prejudices." Amar Ramessar, a member of the Bharata Sevashram Sangha and president of the Yuva Shakti Sangh at the Radha Krishna Mandir, agrees: "I would urge any person to live a dignified life, which leads to a peaceful coexistence with the society. Prejudices are born out of ignorance and fear; our work can help in the education necessary to overcome them."

Pandit Nanda Sahadeo of the Triumph



VIDYARATHA KISSOON

Hindu Mandir, in a letter published in the *Stabroek News* in May, 2008, reminded Hindus that the exhortation of Lord Rama in the *Shri Ramcharitmanas* Uttarkand Doha 87 included the *napumsak* as part of His creation. "*Napumsak*," she explained, "means one who does not have the characteristics of either man or woman—a man trapped in a woman's body or a woman trapped in a man's body." Scriptures can be interpreted on many levels, and the debate will continue. Swami Aksharananda calls for the use of reason, believing the answer for a peaceful and humane solution will lie with Hindu society more than in religious exegesis. Biologist Ian Kisson agrees, drawing on science to point out many examples of diversity in sexual orientation in nature, urging us to talk openly and inquisitively.

Whether or not Guyana acts soon to protect the rights of its 30,000 homosexuals, Hindus have a wonderful opportunity to examine different points of view, exert tolerance, and gain strength by forging a union in diversity.

A Scripture, a Scholar, Science and a Sage: Reviewing Homosexuality in Hinduism

On the fifth day after a woman's period, copulation leads to the birth of a child through the union of the woman's lunar (left) subtle breath and the man's solar (right) subtle breath. If the element earth predominates, a daughter will result; if water dominates, a son will be born; if, however, fire prevails, the pregnancy will end in miscarriage; and if akasha (ether) is dominant, the child will be a homosexual.

Shiva Svarodaya, a Hindu scripture on *ida*, *pingala* and the *pranas* of the body

Intersexuals, in whom male and female aspects are combined, are considered holy in India because they invoke the primordial androgyneity. They have special functions within society other than the transmission of the genetic code by procreation. Even today, the presence of a *hijra*, the last vestige of the androgynous shaman, is a good omen in a marriage ceremony. The influence of Anglo-Saxon puritanism has meant that the anglicized groups in modern India pretend they do not know of the sacred aspect of the Third Nature and homosexual practices.

Alain Daniélou, French Indologist

The **American Psychiatric Association** stated in 1973 that homosexuality is not a disorder and "implies no impairment in judgment, stability, reliability or general social or vocational capabilities." After thoroughly reviewing the scientific data, the **American Psychological Association** adopted the same stance in 1975, and urged all mental health professionals "to take the lead in removing the stigma of mental illness that has long been associated with homosexual orientations." The Supreme Court of the State of California used these opinions in a key case, adding that "Mental health professionals and researchers have long recognized that being homosexual poses no inherent obstacle to leading a happy, healthy and productive life, and that the vast majority of gay and lesbian people function well in the full array of social institutions and interpersonal relationships."

Sexual intercourse is a natural reproductive function. It also serves through its intimacy to express and nurture love. It is love which endows intercourse with its higher qualities, transforming it from an animal function to a human fulfillment. Intensely personal matters of sex are not legislated, but left to the judgment of those involved, subject to community laws and customs. Hinduism neither condones nor condemns birth control, sterilization, masturbation, homosexuality, petting, polygamy or pornography. It does not exclude or draw harsh conclusions against any part of human nature, though scripture prohibits adultery and forbids abortion except to save a mother's life. Advice in such matters should be sought from parents, elders and spiritual leaders. The only rigid rule is wisdom, guided by tradition and virtue.

Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami



Beware of Alien Morals

Fears of damnation and extinction derive not from Hinduism, but from irrational zealotry

BY SWAMI AKSHARANANDA

WHEN GUYANA'S INTER-RELIGIOUS ORGANISATION issued a statement denouncing homosexuality, the central argument was that unseen parties want to influence and corrupt young impressionable minds to promote homosexuality. The statement instructed us that the scriptures of all religions condemn homosexuality, as against the "natural law," violating the natural plan of creation, that will lead to the damnation of our nation and to our extinction.

The most extraordinary claim, however, is that homosexuality is a product of Western culture, a new form of colonialism.

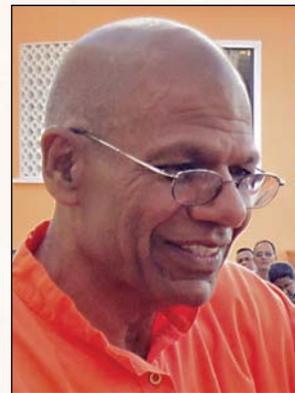
This statement reflects a host of irrational fears that cannot be empirically supported by social reality anywhere in the world. People are not converted to homosexuality in the manner of religious proselytizers who, through unconscionable and despicable methods, unapologetically and deliberately target young and impressionable minds and prey on people's vulnerability.

Of all societies in the world where homosexuality is accepted as an alternative lifestyle, none has suffered the kind of the degradation that our religious leaders fear may take place here in Guyana. The Netherlands, for example, and particularly the Dutch city of Amsterdam, is perhaps one of the most liberal places in the world. The city even boasts a monument devoted to the memory of homosexuals who have been persecuted throughout the ages. There can be few places in the world that breathe such an air of freedom, sophistication and culture, music, art and literature, much of it contributed by homosexuals themselves, as Amsterdam.

From Finland to Italy and across the Atlantic to United States and Canada, liberal, compassionate and enlightened attitudes towards diversity and alternative lifestyles are an integral part of peaceful, progressive, humane societies. In these nations, the family continues to prosper. There are no signs of "extinction" and "damnation."

Such fears derive not from homosexuality, but from irrationality and fanatic religious zealots of every stripe and star, from those religious persuasions which claim to be the sole repository of the truth to which all else must be converted, and from followers of such religions who do not have the patience to wait for unbelievers and homosexuals to be punished in the afterlife, as their teachings go, but who with awesome zeal seek to do so here and now.

Ardhanarishvara: Hindu folk traditions believe members of the third sex are auspicious because, akin to the Gods or a soul, they are not bound by gender



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So, who or what poses the greatest dangers to society? Is it homosexuality, or is it religious intolerance? The clear and unambiguous truth is that the greatest danger lies among those aggressive, intolerant religious creeds of the world that see unbelievers and those whom they believe violate the "natural law" as agents of the devil and enemies of God.

We must guard against the self-appointed arbiters of morality, the moral policemen, who claim to derive their authority and inspiration from ancient and divine writs that, implicitly and explicitly, leave no room for toleration of religious differences—or other diversities such as sexual orientation.

This brings us to the claim that having a liberal and enlightened attitude towards homosexuality means that we are giving in to Western influence and values. It is always intriguing when we hear uninformed people speak of homosexuality as a form of colonialism. Aren't they aware of the apparent contradictions? Of all the institutions we have inherited from the colonial past, there is none more thoroughly colonial and Western, heart and soul, than Christianity—a religion whose scriptures are often

invoked when vilifying homosexuals.

The fact of the matter is that homosexuality is as old as humanity itself. It has been practiced for untold centuries, in one form or another, even in those societies where, today, death can be the penalty for homosexuals.

We must also be concerned about what is glibly and uncritically invoked to be the position of scriptures on homosexuality. There is hardly any consensus here. While it is true that some religious books consider homosexuality an abomination, Hinduism, for example, offers a much more nuanced and sophisticated perspective on the matter. While Hinduism does not approve of homosexuality, it admits of a wide range of sexual orientation possibilities; therefore, the vehemence and stridency of loud anti-homosexual sentiments cannot be shared by Hindus.

Rationality is all I am advocating. Religious people often decide which things are right and wrong based on what they believe and imagine to be true, which in turn is based on what is stated in their religious texts. How does one know whether a religious scripture is right? The answer is that it is the inviolable, unalterable word of God. And, how does one know that it is the word of God? The only answer is because God says so. Quite an eternal conundrum!

When held beyond the scrutiny of reason, no religious scripture, no matter how sacred we hold it to be, can ever be a safe ground on which to decide important issues that may have implications in matters of life and death.

Swami Aksharananda, Ph.D. in Hindu Studies at the University of Wisconsin–Madison (USA), is principal of the Saraswati Vidya Niketan. He is also a founder of Guyana's Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh chapter.



THOMAS KELLY

So Say Our Sadhus

Opinions are far from unanimous

FOR MILLENIA, THE KUMBHA MELAS HAVE BEEN THE SUMMIT gathering of Hindu leaders. A sampling of opinions from the Mela sadhus carries great authority. Here is what they had to say in 2004, in Ujjain, about homosexuality and gay marriage. In India, questions about homosexuality are often met with answers about gay marriage, as if one was the inexorable consequence of the other. This was a hushed subject at the time, before the Supreme Court of India decriminalized gay sex in 2009 and hurled the topic onto the public stage.

Swami Pragyananda Maharaj, Mahamandaleshwar of the Awahan Akhara: Gay marriages do not fit in our culture and heritage. All those who demand the approval of such marriages in India are doing so under the influence of the West. Incorrect Western practices have no place in our culture; we should not blindly follow. Sanatana Dharma has no place for this and we do not even discuss it.

Shri Mahant Madhusudan Giri, Awahan Akhara: This issue is connected not just to Hinduism, but to the whole human civilization. Today, people are changing their religions and nationalities; they are even changing their sex. We have to allow people to live their lives in their own way. If they choose to live in a particular way, out of the consent of two grown-up people, how can we stop them? Religion has no role in this.

Mahant Baba Ram Puri, Juna Akhara: These questions are contemporary in nature and context. To somehow project that to the Vedas, Rama Kathas or the Mahabharata and look for answers there is not appropriate. The rule books back then described a society with different goals, ideas, costumes, diets and everything else. We do not have a final rule book in Hinduism. Even the *Manu Smriti* says that local traditions can overrule its guidelines. There has never been a single authority to represent all Hindus and guide them on morality. Ours is a pluralistic society, and the community has to exercise its wisdom.

Maharishi Sarkhandi Mahatyagi, from Gujarat: This is just *adharmic*. If these relations were to be accepted, then why was creation created? When Brahma directed Manu to create the world, Manu clearly said that the creation could not be made without women. Hindu dharma cannot sanction man-to-man marriages.

Pandit Shailendra Shri Sheshnarayan Ji Vaidyaka, Digambar Sadhu of the Simhastha Samiti: Whatever is done in hiding becomes a wrong act and is treated as a sin. But whatever is done openly invites criticism for some time but ultimately may gain acceptance. People who are bent upon doing something would do it anyway. Why not give them the liberty to live in their own way? Our scriptures have no reference to homosexuality; therefore, we have nothing to say.

Nirvanpeethadheeshwar Shri 108 Devananda, Mahamandaleshwar of the Mahanirvani Akhara: Gay marriages definitely would pollute our society. Such perverted activities used to be carried out by a few. To give legitimacy and social acceptance to it would be a big injustice to our social life. This is an activity which people do not do openly, therefore it is a social crime. It should stay secret. Scriptures may or may not give a guideline, but if we see this in the context of society, we find it to be absolutely wrong. It portrays a very dark side of our society.

Acharya Mahamandaleshwar Swami Avdheshananda, Juna Peethadheeshwar: Homosexuality is unnatural, uncommon and unusual. It is not marriage, because it is just connected to the body, it is only fun. This is sheer madness that comes from the West where they use the Bible. Our scriptures, which are superior, are against it.

Shri 1008 Kapalik Mahakaal Bhairavananda Saraswati, from New Delhi: Certainly this is going to give people bad diseases which will be a great problem to gay-friendly USA in the times to come. US Government should also take action against such people immediately. India does not have such issues. The day a demand for gay unions is raised in India will be a black day for the country.

Mahamandaleshwar Swami Banwari Puri, Juna Akhara: Our tradition does not approve of gay marriages. But our scriptures do not outline a clear direction. The *Bhagwat* has a story, which I have read nowhere else, in which King Bhagirath was born out of physical union of both his mothers. Same-sex marriage is against the laws of God. Now, whether such marriages can keep such couples happy and peaceful should be answered only by gays—not by us, who have no idea what it is all about.

A CORRESPONDENT'S ADVENTURE by Rajiv Malik

IT WAS 2004, AND I HAD BEEN ASSIGNED to ask the Mela's constellation of saints: "How does Hinduism view homosexuality? What about gay marriage?" In retrospect, I realize that HINDUISM TODAY was ahead of its time. This became a hotly debated topic in India a few years later.

Raising the subjects of homosexuality and gay marriage was not easy. Hindu holy men hardly enjoyed discussing these

contentious subjects amongst the crowds. Some sadhus briskly asked me to switch off the tape recorder. They inquired the reasons behind my inquiry; did I have any agenda?

But the revered spiritual leaders slowly opened up, at times hesitantly, and eventually spoke with candor. Once they became convinced that our idea was to inform and educate Hindus, they gave their consent to go ahead and ask these difficult questions.