

Born to Two Mothers, The Hero Bhagiratha

Female-Female Love and Miraculous Birth in Hindu Texts

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This essay examines some fourteenth-century sacred narratives of the hero Bhagiratha's birth to two queens who are co-wives and who become lovers after they are widowed. Placing these stories in the context of pre-modern Indian notions of co-wifery, same-sex sexual relations, same-sex co-parenting, and miraculous or monstrous conception by Gods and humans, the author asks how a relationship that may be perceived as abnormal and a child that may be perceived as illegitimate come to be written into sacred texts as divinely blessed and miraculous.

Love, Sex Or Both?

In our book *Same-Sex Love in India*, which was a collection of translations from texts composed over a period of 2000 years in 15 Indian languages, Saleem Kidwai and I argued that to look only for evidence of sexual intercourse in representations of same-sex relationships in pre-modern texts is to overlook many of the criteria, such as commitment and exclusivity, which define love in cross-sex relationships.¹ Same-sex relationships are today often viewed as being all about sex; "love" (and marriage, with its emphasis on love) thus come to be reserved for cross-sex relationships. In the title of our book, Kidwai and I therefore deliberately used the word "love" rather than "desire" or "sex," the words preferred by some theorists.²

Historian Alan Bray has demonstrated argues those same-sex (mostly male) intimate relationships in medieval and Renaissance Western Europe that were publicly celebrated in texts and funerary monuments were embedded in other kinship relations and were also

perceived as contributing to the welfare of the community and thereby to the glory of God.³ Most of Bray's materials do not indicate whether or not the loves thus celebrated had a sexual dimension. The European Christian over-emphasis on the Biblical injunction against sodomy rendered impossible any public celebration or even acknowledgment of same-sex sexual relationships.

Some pre-modern Hindu texts, however, operating within a distinctly different world-view, are able to accommodate same-sex sexual relationships within the norm of love, which pre-modern Christian texts are unable to do. This accommodation is not entirely free from anxiety, but

cross-sex sexual love too evokes some anxiety in most cultures, including Indic cultures.

Cross-sex romantic relationships in most Western countries expect and generally receive social approval, unless some other factor (such as class, race or age difference) intervenes. Conversely, few romantic relationships received automatic social approval in pre-modern societies, whether European or Asian. A romantic relationship, whether cross-sex or same-sex, had to prove itself as good and worthy of social approval by being about more than just sex. Lovers had to demonstrate that they loved not just each other but also the greater good. In Christian terms, the good love had to be about both *eros* and *agape*. But in Christian texts only cross-sex relationships can include both love and sex; same-sex relationships can be good only if they are defined as love and friendship (*amicitia*). Same-sex sexual relationships are automatically outlawed; whether they are loving or not becomes irrelevant. I claim that in Hindu texts, same-sex relationships can sometimes be about both love and sex and yet be termed good.⁴

In the texts I examine celebrate sexual love between co-widows is



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embedded in kinship and conduces to the welfare of the patrilineal family and the community. The women's sexual relationship is praiseworthy because it occurs with divine blessing, fulfills both human and divine aims, and furthers the good of the family, the community, and posterity. But it also results in physical and emotional pleasure for the individuals concerned. Unlike Christian canonical texts, these canonical Hindu texts are able to conceive of a same-sex sexual relationship that is good in terms similar to those in which a cross-sex sexual relationship is represented as good.



public debate. Right-wing Christian opponents of same-sex parenting repeatedly state that every child must be raised by a father and a mother. This cliché coexists in the U.S. debate with another cliché, popularized by Hillary Clinton – that it takes a village to raise a child. In many Indian families, the reality of child-rearing lies somewhere in between these clichés. Indian children are generally raised by more than two adults. These may include parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles. Widowed and divorced mothers often raise children with the active participation of aunts, grandmothers, female servants

Conjugality of Co-Wives

This raises the further question: if this love is good, is it conjugal? Are co-wives in any sense married to one another? When they marry the same man, they commit themselves to living not only with him but also with each other. Since the sexual relationship between Bhagiratha's two mothers occurs in the context of marriage and with divine blessing, is it analogous to marriage? Like the relationship between husband and wife, the relation between co-wives is usually a lifelong one. In fact, co-wives normally spend much more time on an everyday basis with one another than with their husband.

Keeping in mind the dominant Indian ideal that conjugal love and attraction between husband and wife develop after, not before, marriage, may co-wives also be expected to develop love for each other, and what kinds of love are they shown developing in Indian texts? To ask this question is to go against the dominant textual and popular notion that the only emotions co-wives feel for one another are hatred and jealousy.

While there is no doubt that many co-wives do feel these emotions both in life and in literature, there is also no doubt that some co-wives do develop feelings of love and attraction for one another. I am interested in the way Indian texts represent and evaluate these feelings.

Once the husband dies, how do co-wives live out their relationships with one another? The dominant stereotype is that widows live miserable lives, oppressed and shunned by all. In reality, not all widows live in joint families with relatives who oppress them. Widows often have greater freedom and mobility than do married women, and may acquire the position of powerful matriarchs in the family. A glimpse of the more hidden aspects of co-widows' relationships with one another is provided by the Bengal texts' accounts of the birth of Bhagiratha.

Same-Sex Couples as Parents

Both in India and the West many same-sex couples raise children together. The larger numbers and greater visibility of such couples in the West today has led to a major

and co-wives.

Half-siblings refer to each other as siblings, and in Hindi generally address their father's other wives as "big mother" or "small mother."⁵ The Hindi term for a co-mother is *sauteli ma*, often inadequately translated as "stepmother." *Sauteli* derives from *saut*, which means "co-wife." So the function of co-motherhood derives from the status of co-wifeness. "Co-mother" would be a closer translation for *sauteli ma*. The *saut* or co-wife plays an important part in folk songs and stories as well as in major texts like the epics. Co-parenting also often intersects with adoption within the family. Thus a couple that cannot have children will often adopt a nephew or niece, and a woman who cannot have children may adopt a co-wife's child.

Bhagiratha in Bengal

Bhagiratha is an important figure to Hindus because he brought the Ganga down to earth from heaven, a task his father and several of his forefathers had tried and failed to perform. One of the names of the river Ganga is Bhagirathi in Bhagiratha's honor. His name also survives today in the popular imagination through the

expression idiomatic in several Indian languages, “*Bhagiratha prayatna*,” the equivalent of “Herculean feat.”

Bhagiratha is a hero and a benefactor of humanity. He also fulfilled a duty to his ancestors in the sun lineage. His great-great-grandfather king Sagara had sixty thousand sons who were killed by the wrathful sage Kapila. Their funerary ceremonies were postponed until the Ganga could be brought down to earth. Bhagiratha appears in the part of the *Ramayana* that recounts the ancestry of King Rama.

The story of Bhagiratha’s birth to two women occurs, as far as I know, only in texts produced from the fourteenth century onwards in Bengal. Why is this so? Bengal is one of the centers of Goddess or Shakti worship and also of Vaishnavism or worship of Vishnu, the preserver God, especially in his incarnations as Krishna and Rama. These traditions often assume syncretic forms in Bengal. The Bengal texts that tell the story of Bhagiratha’s birth to two women are primarily Vaishnava texts, glorifying Vishnu, but I suggest that the influence of Shakta traditions is present in the way these texts develop the idea of two women procreating in a parthenogenetic manner. Among these texts are the Bengal manuscripts of the *Padma Purana*, which is a Vaishnava text, in Sanskrit but written in the Bengali script; and various versions of the *Krittivasa Ramayana* in Bengali. The *Krittivasa Ramayana* is still the most popular version of the Rama story in Bengal today. The Bhagiratha story also appears in some later texts produced in Bengal.

These medieval Bengali script texts do not invent the idea of two women producing a child; they derive it from the ancient Hindu medical text, the *Sushruta Samhita*, which remarks that since the father contributes the bones and the mother the flesh and blood, a child born from two women’s

intercourse will be a boneless lump of flesh.⁶ However, this medical text represents such a birth as monstrous, while the Bengal narratives represent it as miraculous. Some of the Bengal narratives recount how the boneless child survives without bones and is cured later in life, while others represent the child born undeformed through the gods’ blessings. Neither of these possibilities is envisaged in the *Sushruta Samhita*. I argue that the Bengal texts develop these possibilities in the context of devotion to Goddesses, well developed in that region by the fourteenth century.

Vatsyayana in *Padma Purana*

In the Bengal version of the *Padma Purana*, The narrator of the Bhagiratha story is the primal serpent, Sheshanaga, and the interlocutor is the sage Vatsyayana. Vatsyayana is famous as the author of the *Kamasutra*, the fourth-century erotic treatise that discusses a wide range of sexual relationships. Vatsyayana’s role here would recall to the reader the sophisticated exegesis of eroticism in the *Kamasutra*, which includes a fairly non-judgmental and pleasurable account of same-sex sexual relations, and a comment that these relations may be practiced according to the customs of one’s community and region and one’s own

inclinations, and also remarking that desire takes many unaccountable forms and leads to actions somewhat beyond analysis or interrogation.⁷ Through this allusion along with an implied reference to the ancient medical text, the *Sushruta Samhita*, the text places itself in the context of sacred textual traditions, both medical and erotic, that are already at this time over a millennium old. It both claims the authority of those traditions to legitimize its account of the miraculous birth of Bhagiratha, and also develops those traditions by interpretation, since it gives a new twist to the idea of female-female sex and procreation that is not present in the ancient texts.

In the Bengal *Padma Purana*, the story is brief. King Dilipa’s two widows grow worried after he dies childless. They visit the family priest Vasishtha in his hermitage and request him to help them continue the family line.⁸ Vashistha, who is immersed in meditation, assures them that a son will be born to them. He then performs the *putreshti* sacrifice, which, as its name indicates, is aimed at obtaining a son (*putra*), and prepares a food called *charu* (literally, sweet or pleasant). Giving this food to the queens, he tells them that one of them should eat it and the other should have sexual intercourse with her, with the *bhava* of a man (*purushabhavena maithunaya*). The word *bhava* can mean, among other things, “being,” “temperament,” “way or manner,” “intention, purpose,” “mind, heart,” “emotion, inclination,” “notion, idea,” or “outward indication of emotion. As no physical change here takes place in the queen who is advised to take on the *bhava* of a man, the term suggests performing through outward action a desire, emotion or inclination, in this case one that is directed towards a woman and is therefore usually attributed to a man.



When the queens obey his instructions, the older one becomes pregnant. The text tells us that the child is born without bones and is named Bhagiratha because he is born of the *bhaga* (vulva) alone. This type of explanation for the name Bhagiratha, found only in the Bengali script texts, is interesting because it explicitly credits both women with the act of conception, and credits the female reproductive system with independently generative power.

Bhagiratha, being boneless, is crippled and ugly, but he grows up and is well educated, learning all the Vedas in his childhood. On the way to study with his teacher Vasishtha, he one day encounters the sage Ashtavakra, whose name literally means “bent in eight places.”⁹ As his name indicates, Ashtavakra is deformed, and when Bhagiratha greets him, the sage suspects that the boy is mocking him by mimicking his crippled condition. The infuriated sage declares that if the boy is mocking him, he will be burnt to ashes, but if he is naturally crooked, he will immediately attain beauty and strength. As a result of these words, Bhagiratha’s body is transformed – he becomes a strong youth, as beautiful as Kama, God of love. Thanking Ashtavakra, he proceeds to meet Vasishtha, who is so impressed by his beauty that he crowns him king.

Extreme Love in Krittivasa

There are several versions of the *Krittivasa Ramayana* and the story of Bhagiratha appears only in some manuscripts. This is an accretive text – additions continued to be made to it up to the eighteenth century.¹⁰ In the version widely available in Bengali today, which has also been translated into English and Brajbhasha, the story is an expansion of the one I have recounted above. As a translation of this version has already appeared in *Same-Sex Love in India* I shall summarize it here instead of

reproducing the translation.¹¹ For purposes of comparative analysis, I refer to this version as Krittivasa 1.

The Gods Brahma and Indra grow worried when King Dilipa of Ayodhya, descendant of Sagara, dies childless. Ayodhya is without a ruler, and Vishnu is to be incarnated as Rama in the royal lineage. Now that Dilipa is dead, the line seems to have come to an end. The Gods hold a consultation and send Shiva to Ayodhya. Shiva goes to Dilipa’s two widows and tells them they will have a son by his blessing. When the widows ask how this is possible, Shiva instructs them to have sexual intercourse with each other. This text adds a short description to the story: “The two wives of Dilipa took a bath. The two young women lived together in extreme love [*Sampritiite achhilen se dui yuvati*]. After some time, one of them menstruated. Both of them knew one another’s intentions and enjoyed love play [*keli karitey*], and one of them conceived.”¹²

The child is born as a boneless lump of flesh. The embarrassed and grief stricken, mothers decide to throw him into the river Sarayu. Vasishtha intervenes and advises them to leave him on the roadside instead, which they do. After they leave, the sage Ashtavakra sees and curses the deformed child who gets transformed exactly as in the Bengal *Padma Purana*. Ashtavakra then calls the two queens who are delighted and take their son home. Ashtavakra performs the naming ceremony and the child is named Bhagiratha, which is here somewhat differently explained – he was born not of the vulva alone but of two vulvas (*bhage bhage janam hetu bhagirath nam*).

Child of Same-Sex Parents

The next section in Krittivasa 1 appears to be unique among medieval texts in its depiction of problems faced at school by a child of two mothers. Parts of the description resonate with

the predicament of children of single mothers and lesbians today.

When Bhagiratha is five years old he is sent to study with other children at sage Vasishtha’s hermitage. One day, when the children are quarreling, another child calls him *jaaraj* or a child born of a mother’s adulterous lover. Bhagiratha is deeply hurt and makes no answer. With tears in his eyes and feeling unstable, he lies down in the sulking room (*kopa graha*) at school. When it grows late, his mother becomes worried and, like a tigress deprived of her cub, asks the sage where her son is. Vasishtha tells her not to weep and leads her to her son. She embraces the child, wipes his tears, asks what is troubling him, and promises to find a doctor to cure whatever ails him. Bhagiratha replies that he is not suffering from any ailment or wound but that someone has insulted him by calling him a bastard.

Bhagiratha then asks his mother, “To what lineage do I belong and to what clan, and whose son am I?” His mother tells him the true story of how his ancestors of the Sagara clan were destroyed by the sage Kapila’s curse, and how three of his forefathers had performed austerities in an unsuccessful attempt to bring the Ganga down to earth to redeem them. She also narrates how his father Dilipa died childless and how he was born as a result of Shiva’s blessing. She tells him that he was named Bhagiratha because he was born of two vulvas. He was born in the race of the sun in the city of Ayodhya. Hearing this, Bhagiratha laughs.

When his mother asks why he is laughing, he replies that bringing Goddess Ganga to earth is not a small task but a “Bhagiratha” task that only he can perform. He then declares his intention of bringing Ganga down for the benefit of his ancestors. His two mothers grow anxious and try to dissuade him because he is too young

for such an exploit, but he does not listen to them. He takes diksha (initiation, completion of education) from Vashistha and takes leave of his mothers. He then begins to perform severe austerities, addressed to each of the Gods in turn, which ultimately result in his successfully bringing the Ganga down to earth.

The Monsoon Romance

The two queens' personalities are more developed in another version of the Krittivasa Ramayana, found in only one manuscript, which I shall refer to as Krittivasa 2. We are told their names – Chandra and Mala; and rather than being instructed to make love in order to have a son, they spontaneously make love in the romantic monsoon season, while lying in their late husband's bedroom. Kama, god of love, who inspires all lovers, infuses them with his *tej* (energy/brilliance) and the pregnancy is an unexpected and initially unwelcome by-product.

The God who intervenes here is Brahma, not Shiva, and Kama acquires a more active role. Because Kama inspires the pregnancy, the child is born beautiful and healthy, with bones.

Here is the relevant section, after the death of King Dilipa:

The Gods in heaven congregated to address the matter.

Without the Suryavansha [the sun's lineage] the world would cease to be.

Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwara [Shiva] met on Mount Kailash.

Lord Brahma conferred with all the Gods and decided to summon Sage Vasishtha.

He requested Vasishtha to help Chandra and Mala get a son.

“Vishnu Vishnu,” said the sage, covering his ears, and refused to comply with their wishes.

After Vasishtha's refusal they called upon Madan [Kama].

Brahma directed Madan to make haste and make a son be born from the stomachs of Chandra and Mala.

Obedying Brahma's bidding Madan went straight into the inner quarters of the palace.

As Madan reached the king's palace the two queens began menstruating.

Three days later they took the purifying bath, entered their husband's sanctum [literally, temple, *mondire*], and lay down there.

The sky was overcast with clouds, the swans sang and the peacocks danced.

The skies darkened and a stormy rain followed.

Burning with desire induced by Madan, Chandra and Mala took each other in embrace, and each kissed the other.

Chandravati played the man and Mala the woman
[*Chandraboti purush hoilo Mala hoilo nari*]

The two women dallied and made love

[*Dui nari mono ronge rongo krira kori*].

God's blessing had enabled the two women to play the game of love and the energy [*tej*] of Madan [love/desire] entered the womb of Malavati.

When Malavati realizes she is pregnant, she cannot understand it, but, fearing social disgrace, she goes to the river Sarayu to commit suicide, and Brahma comes to stop her. He explains that this pregnancy is divinely planned to enable the royal lineage to continue, and goes on to say:

“If there is any demerit within you, let me bear it and you can go home free of it.

Your son will be the incarnation of God and his able hands will save the world.”

The child is born beautiful and healthy. The problem of his being boneless does not arise in this version. The episode concludes:

Since he was born of the mutual enjoyment (*sambhog*)

between two vaginas [*bhaga*]

God Brahma named him Bhagiratha.

Erotic Power as Sacred Power

The most important difference between Krittivasa 2 and the other versions is that here Bhagiratha is born as a healthy beautiful boy, not a boneless lump of flesh. Brahma cites the involvement of Madan, God of love, as the reason for this. The gods' blessing is more powerfully evident



in this text than the others as here the inauspiciousness of a deformed birth is preempted by love. The presence of the God of love trumps both the medical prognostication that a child born of two women's union will be boneless and also the impurity possibly associated with their sexual union. The creator God, Brahma, taking any inauspiciousness on himself, enables the healthy creation of a child from same-sex love. The extended romantic description of the women's love, attraction, and sexual union in this text would appear to be not fortuitous but directly relevant to the auspiciousness of the outcome. match between Bhagiratha's mothers is literally made in heaven. The God of love's role is important and must be understood in the context of what this god represents. Madan or Kamadeva is the God of love, desire, and beauty. Like the Greek Eros and the Roman Cupid, he represents erotic desire and energy, human, non-human, and divine. It is natural for this creative energy to be associated with Brahma, the creator God, and to be at war with Shiva, the destroyer god. Unlike Cupid, Madan or Kama is invisible, as a result of a curse inflicted by Shiva whose meditations he disturbed. He is therefore also called Ananga or the bodiless one.

Kama, one of the four aims of life according to Hindu sacred texts, is a universal principle. The God Kama, therefore, represents an irresistible natural urge as well as a social desideratum and a divinely ordained law. In literary convention, two persons who fall in love are said to have been struck by the arrows of Kama and therefore to be helpless to resist desire. However, in Hindu texts this principle is somewhat fraught because it is opposed by the principle of Hindu asceticism. Kama's conflict with Shiva reflects this opposition. Although reduced to ashes by Shiva, Kama, backed by all the gods, does

triumph, since he succeeds in awakening Shiva from his ascetic trance and making him respond to the attractions of goddess Parvati. Shiva also restores Kama to life at the request of Kama's wife Rati (literally, sexual pleasure). Although Kama is a male God, he is invisible and his "energy" or "spirit" (tej) that impregnates Mala may be read as the male element required for birth (analogous to donated sperm used by lesbian mothers today) or as symbolic of the universal energy of desire.

Erotic desire in Indian literature, art, and even modern cinema, is strongly associated with the rainy season. This association is found in works both of Hindu and Indian Islamic provenance. Lovers are usually shown trysting and sporting while peacocks dance, clouds darken the sky, and rain falls. Krittivasa 2 follows these conventions and thus places the relationship of Chandra and Mala squarely in the mainstream of erotic representation.

Unlike *Padma Purana* and Krittivasa 1, the two widows here do not ask for a son nor do they unite at the behest of a God or a sage in order to have a son. This allows for them and their relationship to be depicted with greater psychological depth. They engage in love making, like any other lovers, merely because they are inspired by desire, conventionally embodied in the god Kama. Although Kama is acting at the behest of the gods, the two widows are not aware of this. Lying in their husband's bedroom, in the fertile rainy season, while they themselves are fertile, they follow their impulses. Unlike husbands and wives, who, in the sacred texts, usually engage in sex with the desire to procreate and are disappointed if they fail to do so, these two widows engage in lovemaking for its own sake.

Most love stories address the feelings of wonder regarding agency

that lovers experience – did they love one another of their own will or agency or was the event in some sense fated or providential? This age-old uncertainty today takes the form of the controversy about whether same-sex desire is inborn or a choice. Indian texts routinely explain love as the result of attachments in a former life or of divine intervention. Ancient Greek texts generally represent love as a madness sent by Aphrodite, goddess of love, or Eros, god of love. The residual power of such notions persists in English in such phrases as "falling in love" or "a match made in heaven."

The divine messenger appears after instead of before the conception and reveals the purpose of the miracle to Mala. The messenger here is Brahma, the creator, instead of Shiva. He explains that the presence of the God of love enabled the two queens to make love. Brahma then makes an interesting offer – if there is any demerit involved in this union or this desire, he will bear it and she will be free of it. This mention of possible demerit builds on the element of anxiety introduced into this text by sage Vashishtha's horror; this anxiety is not found in this form in the *Padma Purana* and Krittivasa 1, although there it perhaps takes the form of the child's deformity at birth, which is noticeably absent in Krittivasa 2.

The word Brahma uses is *paap*, often translated as "sin" but in fact, closer in meaning to "impure/demeritorious actions," as opposed to *punya* or pure/meritorious actions. *Paap* in the Hindu context is very different from sin in the Christian context. In the Hindu context, *paap* is the demerit born of bad actions that attaches to the self and causes rebirth; however, the merit born of good actions also attaches to the self and causes rebirth. Demerit will result in a lower birth and suffering while merit will result in a higher birth (even a birth as a god or demi-god) and

happiness. However, since life is bound by time and is always a mixture of happiness and suffering, and since even the happiness acquired by merit will get exhausted in time, humans should strive to be detached from all actions and not to accumulate either merit or demerit, thereby liberating themselves altogether from rebirth. In Christianity, since the soul is born only once and after death is either saved by faith or damned by sin, sin is potentially much more deadly.

Brahma's offer suggests that there may be some demerit or impurity associated with the queens' love making. He does not elaborate on this suggestion nor does he say that there definitely is impurity associated with it (he uses the conditional "If"). The impurity in question could be related to same-sex relations; more likely, it could refer to the taboo on widows indulging their sexual and other sensual desires. Brahma's taking the impurity on himself and freeing the queens from it indicates that the impurity, inspired by the god Kama, is not a major one. The *Kamasutra* declares that objects normally considered impure are pure for certain purposes – thus, although Hindus normally consider another person's saliva impure, a woman's mouth is pure during sex.

That the two women are widows is a fact whose significance bears examination. Krittivasa's *Ramayana*, a normative sacred text in Bengal, endorses the widows' sexual pleasure, and thus flies in the face of the stereotype that Hindu widows, especially in Bengal, are stripped of agency and totally forbidden to indulge in pleasure, especially sexual pleasure.

The etymology given for Bhagiratha's name is the same as in the other texts, but it is Brahma, not a sage, who names him:

*Bhage bhage sambhog je tathe
upagata
Brahmadev thuilen nam
bhagiratha.*

"Since he was born of the mutual enjoyment [sexual intercourse] between two vulvas The god Brahma named him Bhagiratha."

The word "*sambhog*," used in this version but not in the others, literally meaning "mutual enjoyment," is the word generally used to signify sexual intercourse even today. In this version, the gods' displacement of the sages works to heighten the auspiciousness of the relationship that produces the child.

Interpretation in Medical Tests

In what ways do these texts rewrite the ancient Hindu medical texts' view of intercourse between women? The *Sushruta Samhita* (circa second century BC), states that a boneless child, (interpreted by commentators as with cartilaginous bones) is the result of an act of sexual intercourse between two women, in which their *sukra* or sexual fluids unite in the womb of one of them (132).¹³ This idea has to be understood within the overall understanding of conception.

According to this text as well as another contemporaneous medical text, the *Charaka Samhita*, conception is produced by the aggregate of five elements – the father, the mother, the Self or spirit (*atman*), suitability, nutrition, and mind.¹⁴ Of these, the Self is most important, as it causes birth in a particular species, mind, sense organs, respiration, consciousness, memory, ego, will, and so on. The Self plays an important role in conception and in determining gender and other propensities. The mother causes skin, blood, flesh, fat, and all the fleshy organs such as heart, liver, kidneys, stomach, intestines. The father causes hair, nails, teeth, bones, veins, and semen.

The *Charaka Samhita* states that when the maternal element preponderates, the child is female, when the paternal preponderates, the child is male, and when both are equal, the child is of no sex or what today

would be called intersexed. According to this scheme, a child cannot be born without the maternal element as it would be a mere skeleton but it can be born without the paternal element. According to *Sushruta*, a woman dreaming of sexual intercourse can conceive and give birth to a jelly-like mass. However, *Sushruta* does not prescribe any cure for such babies born without bones. In fact, he appears to view such births as monstrous, and the result of sinful acts.

Both in India and in Western Europe, medieval texts often rewrite ancient canonical texts, although claiming to be merely commentaries on the latter. The Bengal narratives of Bhagiratha's birth rewrite the ancient medical texts when they introduce the idea that a child born to two women by divine blessing can be not monstrous but heroic. This idea emerges from medieval Puranic ideas of goddesses and gods giving birth by parthenogenesis and other types of miraculous dynamics.

Gods and heroes in most mythologies are conceived and born miraculously - from virgins, from human-divine intercourse, or from a single parent, male or female. The miracle functions to signal the hero's innate difference from other mortals. As Boswell has shown, heroes are also often raised differently from other children – by adoptive or foster parents, human, divine, or animal.¹⁵ This may signify that they belong not to one family alone but to the whole society; it also serves to mark them as different from others.

In Hindu texts, one of the most common forms of miraculous birth is a god, demon, or Goddess producing other beings from the self. When this happens in the heat of battle, these beings are born of wrath and are terrifying. They aid the parent in fighting. For example, in the *Padma Purana*, Shiva, battling the demon Jalandhara, produces a female deity called Kritya from his third eye.¹⁶

Goddesses and Female Powers

Goddesses usually, but not always, produce females rather than males in this manner. In the *Devi Mahatmya*, the Goddess, who is invoked by the Gods to destroy the demons, creates an army of different types of divine female beings from herself. A similar phenomenon occurs in most Goddess texts. This type of mass production of female beings may be seen as a type of cloning because these beings are all embodiments of the Goddess's different attributes; they mirror her and may merge back into her. In all such cases, the effect of such reproduction is immediate subduing of or submission by the Goddess's opponents or rivals, whether Gods or demons.

Sometimes, however, a female produces another being not from wrath but from other kinds of emotion such as erotic or motherly love. Thus, in the *Padma Purana*, Vishnu, disguised as the demon Jalandhara, seduces Jalandhara's wife Vrinda. While they are engaged in love play, Tulasi, a purifying nymph, arises from Vrinda's sweat. Tulasi (identified with the sacred plant, holy basil) represents Vrinda's pure erotic desire for Vishnu.¹⁷ The plant is still worshiped today by devotees of Vishnu.

Parvati produces Ganesh from her body rubbings merely from maternal longing - she wants a son of her own, who will be devoted only to her. Bhagiratha's mothers, although they are humans, not Goddesses, are enabled to imitate Goddesses when they produce a child from desire - desire for a child and desire for each other.

The ability to produce fully formed beings from the self appears in ancient Hindu texts to be related to the idea, also found in ancient Greek texts, that the earth (also represented as a Goddess), produces certain types of life, such as worms, from herself. In the ancient epic *Ramayana*, Sita, who is a Goddess, is produced from

the earth without human parents and is found by her adoptive father, Janaka, lying in a furrow he is ploughing. She is known as the daughter of earth and at the end of the epic, when she is worn out by Rama's unjust treatment of her, she calls on earth to receive her, and earth opens and swallows her up.

This older idea of divine fecundity takes a specific form in the ancient medical texts' idea of women producing a child together, which in the fourteenth-century Bengal texts again gets transformed by Shakta ideas of the Goddess as the ultimate creative principle. Consequently, older stories too undergo changes and emerge transformed.

Bhagiratha's mothers, however, are not Goddesses. Unlike other beings, such as sages, who reproduce miraculously, they are not even represented as semi-divine or of divine ancestry. They are just ordinary human women. How then, do they participate in a type of reproduction generally reserved for Goddesses or other divine beings?

Some feminist critics are of the opinion that Hindu worship of powerful goddesses has no positive effect whatsoever on Hindu women's status, because Hindus view goddesses as totally different from human women, and goddesses do not share women's suffering.¹⁸ In my view, although Goddess worship does not have a one-to-one equation with improving women's status, it is not true that Hindus see goddesses and women as totally different. In fact, every girl and woman is seen as embodying the Goddess in a latent form, whose powers can become manifest under suitable conditions. Goddesses do not always function to empower women but they often can and do become means that may be so used.

Non-Vaginal, Intervaginal Sex

While the Goddesses spontaneously produce beings from themselves, Bhagiratha's mothers engage in sexual intercourse. The texts do not

downplay but in fact emphasize this by putting forward a folk etymology of Bhagiratha's name - born of two vulvas (*bhagas*). How is it that these sacred texts accommodate and even celebrate a same-sex sexual act which appears to be anti-normative and violative of prescriptive texts like the *Manusmriti* and the *Arthashastra*?

In their repudiation of *ayoni* or non-vaginal sex the Hindu law books directly contradict narratives in epics and Puranas. The law tends to prohibit non-vaginal sex whereas sacred stories often show heroic children springing from such sex. Often the same text, for example, the *Mahabharata* and several of the *Puranas*, contains both stories and precepts, and thus contradicts itself on the question of whether non-vaginal sex is impure or sacred. The explanation of this apparent contradiction may lie in the fact that what is normally taboo or polluted may be excessively sacred in special or ritual contexts. The law books declare that *ayoni* or non-vaginal sexual intercourse is impure and punishable, although that the penalties prescribed are very light compared to penances and punishments imposed for other types of sexual misconduct, such as adultery. The category of *ayoni* sex is very wide - it can include oral sex, manual sex, anal sex, sex with animals, masturbation in the water or in a pot or other aperture. The *Kamasutra* is aware of this prohibition but nevertheless uninhibitedly describes various types of *ayoni* sex between men and between men and women. This text points out that desire takes many shapes, depending on time, place, custom, and individual predilection. It also, as noted earlier, points out that what is normally considered impure may be pure for certain purposes - just as a dog's mouth is normally polluted but considered pure when the dog is used in hunting, so too another person's mouth in sex.

In sacred narrative, Gods and heroes are often born from non-vaginal sex. Celibate sages, when stirred by desire at the sight of a woman, frequently ejaculate into pots or other receptacles. Both the Gurus in the *Mahabharata*, Dronacharya and Kripacharya, are born in this way. A divine variant of this is when Shiva, interrupted during intercourse with his wife, ejaculates into the fire God Agni's hands or mouth (in different versions) from which Kartikeya is born.¹⁹

It would appear then that non-vaginal sex is forbidden or taboo. Like other taboos, this one may be broken by special beings or in special contexts, and is broken in secret by ordinary beings too. The *Kamasutra* takes a worldly approach to the matter, pointing out that many people in secret practice forbidden forms of desire. The sacred texts show that forbidden forms of sex may be practiced by divinities and those with divine powers or by ordinary people under special circumstances, and may have good results. In the West, the category of "sodomy," applied to anal and oral (that is, non-vaginal sex) may appear to be somewhat analogous to that of *ayoni* sex. The British passed a law in India prohibiting sex "against the order of nature" (Section 377, Indian Penal Code, 1860); this law remains on the books and has generally been interpreted to refer to anal or oral sex between men or between a man and a woman. However, it could conceivably be applied to sex between women as well.

There are, however, important differences between sodomy and *ayoni* sex. First, sodomy came to be constructed in Christendom as a horrific sin, almost the worst of all sins, "a favored synecdoche for sin itself."²⁰ Conversely, *ayoni* sex was



and remained a minor infraction of Hindu law. Second, sodomy came to be considered unmentionable and unspeakable – the sin not to be named among Christians, while no similar prohibition on mentioning *ayoni* sex developed among Hindus. Third, from the Renaissance until the nineteenth century in England, sodomy became not just as a sin to be atoned for with religious penance but a legal crime to be punished with disenfranchisement, torture, and even death. No such development took place in the case of *ayoni* sex. As far as I have been able to discover, no one has ever been executed in India for same-sex intercourse.

Apart from these obvious differences, however, an important difference that has not so far been noticed is that *ayoni* literally means "non-vagina," therefore this category is literally incapable of encompassing sex between two women. On the other hand, as many commentators have shown, sodomy was constructed as an ambiguous and catch-all category that ultimately encompassed every type of sexual activity apart from penile-vaginal intercourse in the so-

called missionary position. Masturbation and female-female sexual intercourse of any kind also came to be labeled sodomy. Hence the Indian Penal Code's glossing of "sodomy" as intercourse "against the order of nature."

Here lies the importance of the Bengal texts' insistence that Bhagiratha's name means one born of two vaginas. His birth is not an *ayoni* one; it is, so to speak, a double-*yoni* one (*bhage-bhage*). In *Krittivasa I* there seems to be some awareness that the etymology is suspect, for the text asserts the putative author's reputation as a scholar immediately after providing the etymology: "Because he was

born of two vulvas (*bhaga*) he was named Bhagiratha. The great poet Krittivasa is a recognized scholar (*pandit*). In this Adi Kanda he sings the birth of Bhagiratha."²¹ By repeating the word for vagina (*bhaga*) the texts both enact and underscore the female-female intercourse that resulted in this miraculous birth. The idea of the primal and pure fecundity of the goddess appears to hover behind this construction of his conception.

Bhagiratha's birth is not in "the order of nature" – this is true of many heroes' births. Most cultures acknowledge at least two ways of being non-natural – a phenomenon may be supernatural or divine, or it may be subnatural and demonic. Bhagiratha's birth, like Christ's, is framed as supernatural. In this context, it is important to remember that when males reproduce miraculously in the Hindu texts, a woman or at least an apparent woman is always involved as the inspirer of desire who causes the ejaculation – the sages see beautiful women and ejaculate; Shiva sees Vishnu in the form of Mohini and

ejaculates to produce Harihara; Shiva is interrupted in intercourse with Parvati and ejaculates to produce Kartikeya. But when a goddess produces autonomously, she can do so without the involvement of a male, like Parvati producing Ganesh from her body rubbings or Devi or Sita cloning Matrikas from her self.²²

Children as Divine Blessing

Opponents of same-sex marriage today generally fall back on the argument that procreation is the purpose of marriage. Although this argument ignores the fact that infertile heterosexuals and post-menopausal women are allowed to marry, it still carries a lot of weight. This, Mark Jordan argues, is because the Christian West has not fully given up its historical condemnation of sexual pleasure in general: “the entire force of condemnation – including the surplus of force left over from the concession to marriage – could be brought to bear on it [same-sex love]. The irrational force of the Christian condemnation of Sodomy is the remainder of Christian theology’s failure to think through the problem of the erotic.”²³ Jordan also points out that many branches of Christianity, in their celebration of families and reproduction, have “degenerated into fertility cults” (174), thereby giving up the Gospels’ prioritization of spirit over body. Writing as a Christian, Jordan sees the celebration of biological fertility as pagan, not Christian.

I would go on to argue that a “pagan” emphasis on biological fertility in conjunction with an acceptance of desire and bodily pleasure as fundamental to life might be congenial to the construction of same-sex desire as potentially, if miraculously, fertile. As discussed earlier, Hindu ascetic traditions

developed a deep suspicion of bodily desire and pleasure but this suspicion always was and still is contested in Hindu philosophy and practice by the dominant idea of Kama or desire as one of the four normative aims of life.

Such a concept of bodily, this-worldly pleasure as a major life-goal is not to be found in Christian theology.

The blessing of same-sex intercourse with a miraculous child in the Bhagiratha texts may be read as a heterosexist assimilation of same-sex coupling; it may, conversely, be seen to function as an affirmative incorporation of same-sex sexual and amorous relationships within a religious norm of the good and sanctified life.

Opponents of gay marriage and parenting in the West today insist that the heterosexual nuclear family is the only appropriate environment for child rearing. They consider any other form of parenting, including single motherhood, as less than ideal. For centuries, however, European and American literature has represented single or paired uncles, aunts, older siblings and adoptive parents as superior to neglectful biological parents. Hollywood continues this tradition of representation today.

In Indian joint families not only do co-wives or co-husbands (like the Pandavas in the *Mahabharata*) raise children together but so do brothers and sisters-in-law. This norm is reflected in the Tamil terms for a father’s older brother (*Periappa*, literally, big father) and father’s younger brother (*Chitappa*, literally, small father), and their wives (*Periamma*, big mother, and *Chitti*, small mother). In the *Mahabharata*, the children of the five Pandava brothers, whether born of their common wife Draupadi or

by the separate wives of each brother, merge into a group of “children” in relation to the “parent” generation. All the parents together mourn the deaths of the children in battle.

In many mythologies, a hero is privileged to have more than one mother or to be raised by two loving women – mother and grandmother, mother and aunts, or two mothers. Thus in medieval European art, the infant Christ is often represented as surrounded by his mother and her female kin, especially her mother.²⁴ In Indian traditions, the best example is Krishna who is born to Devaki but raised by Yashoda, the paradigmatic devoted mother.

In the Bhagiratha texts, the two women who miraculously produce a child together are represented raising him together, but in other sacred texts two males who miraculously produce a child rarely raise it together. When Shiva and Vishnu (in the form of Mohini) together produce a son named Harihara (Hari=Vishnu; Hara=Shiva), Mohini is embarrassed and abandons the child on earth where he is found and adopted by a childless royal couple, and grows up to become the god Ayyappa. In a later legend, Ayyappa, when questioned by Narada as to his relationship with Parvati, wife of Shiva, and Lakshmi, wife of Vishnu, becomes puzzled, and retreats to the forest where he is still worshipped.²⁵ In contrast, the god Kartikeya, born, in some versions, of Shiva’s interaction with Agni, is raised by Shiva’s wife Parvati.

However, single men can be represented as very tender adoptive fathers, for example, Shakuntala, born to a sage and a heavenly nymph, is abandoned by her biological parents and raised by another sage who finds her and

adopts her as his daughter. Thus, non-biological parenthood of various types emerges in Hindu sacred stories as both a social reality and an ideal.

Co-mothering by pairs or groups of mothers appears as an ideal as early as the hymns of the Rig Veda (circa 1500 BC). Agni, one of the most important deities in the *Rig Veda* (after Indra, the largest number of hymns address him), is repeatedly described as “child of two mothers” (*dvimatri*), and occasionally, “child of three mothers” (the three worlds). Agni’s two mothers are sometimes Heaven and Earth (the sun, moon, and stars are the fires of heaven) and sometimes the two sticks from which fire is generated for the sacrifice.²⁶ These two parents sometimes are identified as father and mother but far more often, as two mothers.²⁷

The Miracle of Birth

While the Bible and the Qur’an appear to declare all same-sex sexual relationships undesirable, Hindu texts appear to distinguish the desirable from the undesirable. The criteria for judging a relationship praiseworthy appear to be the same whether the relationship is that of siblings, friends, lovers or spouses. The question is: is the relationship a selfish one or does it contribute to the greater good? Purely selfish relationships based only on individual pleasure are judged undesirable and shown to logically culminate in disaster since two individuals who selfishly desire each other for their own pleasure may also desert each other when they discover that they can get greater pleasure elsewhere. Such are the many folk tales that show a man and a woman eloping together only to soon discard one another for other lovers.

Virtuous relationships in normative texts are those where the individuals make sacrifices not only for each other but also for their families and friends, the community, humanity, and the Gods. These norms, which also reappear in modern Indian cinema, are not very different from those in pre-modern Europe. The one significant difference concerns sexual intercourse. European texts judge cross-sex relationships by whether they are only about sexual desire (lust) or also about love, but same-sex relationships are represented only in terms of love. They cannot be represented as good if they are explicitly sexual. This is not always the case in Indic texts.

An argument routinely put forward by opponents in the current international debate about gay marriage is that marriage is for procreation and child-rearing but same-sex couples cannot produce a child together. In response, one could argue that most societies have tended to see fertility as a divine blessing – that is, a child is thought to be produced not just by parents but by some third force, nature or the gods, and even today most societies rhetorically represent every child as a miracle of sorts. If that is the case, then the child of a same-sex couple could be seen as even more of a miracle.

Bhagiratha’s birth to two women is a possible monstrosity made miraculous by divine blessing. Two versions of the story (*Padma Purana* and *Krittivasa* 1) follow the fairytale paradigm wherein inner beauty transforms outward appearance. When the sage realizes that the child is not mocking him, as most children would, he heals the child. In the third version, however, the presence of the third divine

element – the God of love’s energy or *tej*, backed by all the Gods’ blessing, results in the birth of a beautiful and extra-special child.

Bhagiratha, like his mothers’ relationship, may be socially labeled as illegitimate. In one version of the story, he is taunted as the product of adulterous love; in another version, his mother considers suicide. So the miracle is not an easy one – it involves conflict, struggle, and defiance of social norms. Only the Gods and the sages, who are emissaries of the Gods, support Bhagiratha and his mothers. One may compare the medieval European plays that dramatize Joseph’s rejection of Mary as adulterous and her vindication by the angel of God.

Like Jesus or like children of same-sex parents today, Bhagiratha has a shadowy father; Bhagiratha is termed Dilipa’s son as Jesus is termed Joseph’s son. The gods’ participation in his conception also makes him the child of the Gods. If every child is a miracle, because nature or the Gods have to cooperate in conception, then Bhagiratha is no different from other children, except that in his case, the participation of the Gods is more visible. Bhagiratha is different from other children because he has two mothers rather than a father and a mother, but he is also different in having marvelous abilities. He can perform exceptional feats because he himself is the product of an exceptional feat. He may be read as a trope for that which is perceived as abnormal but which actually transcends the normal and rewrites the norm. Like the children of many same-sex parents today, he makes possible the impossible - he is the son of two mothers, and he also brings the Ganga down from heaven. As such, his existence

blessees not just his parents and lineage but also society and humanity at large.

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Endnotes

- 1 Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai, *Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History*, (New York: Palgrave-St Martin's, 2000; New Delhi: Macmillan, 2002), xiii-xiv, xx-xxi.
- 2 For a similar argument, see Allen J. Frantzen, *Before the Closet: Same-Sex Love from Beowulf to Angels in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), especially 16-25.
- 3 Alan Bray, *The Friend* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).
- 4 Even in John Boswell's strong reading of same-sex unions blessed in churches (Same-Sex Unions in Pre-Modern Europe), he does not claim that these marriage-like relationships between men were explicitly and publicly acknowledged as sexual relationships.

5 In the story of Supriya recounted at the beginning of this chapter, Supriya's sons addressed her co-wife in Marathi as Kaki or aunt (literally, father's brother's wife). In most Indian communities, cousins raised in a joint family also think of and refer to one another as siblings.

6 Kaviraj Kunjalal Bhishagratna, *An English Translation of The Sushruta Samhita* (Varanasi: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, 1963), Vol. 2, Chapter 2, p. 132.

7 Alain Danielou, *The Complete Kama Sutra* (Rochester, Vermont: Park Street Press, 1994), 194. For a detailed analysis of same-sex sexual relations in this text, see my essay, "Vatsyayana's *Kamasutra*," in Vanita and Kidwai, *Same-Sex Love in India* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), 46-53.

8 Many Hindu narratives show a sage intervening to give a childless king and/or queen children. In most cases, as in that of the birth of the heroine Damayanti, the sage's blessing has the desired result; in some cases, like that of Vyasa and the widowed queens of Vichitravirya in the *Mahabharata*, the sage himself fathers the widow's child.

9 For an analysis of the disabled Ashtavakra's empowering role in the disabled Bhagiratha's life, see my essay, "Disability as Opportunity: Sage Ashtavakra Mentors Bhagiratha," in Ruth Vanita, *Gandhi's Tiger and Sita's Smile: Essays on Gender, Sexuality and Culture* (forthcoming Yoda Press, New Delhi, 2005).

10 For the dating problem with regard to the *Krittivasa Ramayana*, see Sukumar Sen, *History of Bengali Literature* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1960; 1979), 67-69.

11 Vanita and Kidwai, *Same Sex Love in India*, 100-102. This translation is by Kumkum Roy.

12 Ibid, 101.

13 Kaviraj Kunjalal Bhishagratna, *An English Translation of The Sushruta Samhita*, *ibid*.

14 *Caraka-Samhita*, translated and edited, Priyavrat Sharma (Varanasi: Chaukhamba Orientalia, 2nd. Ed. 1994), Vol. 1, pp. 418-427.

15 John Boswell, *The Kindness of Strangers*

16 *Padma Purana*, VII. 17. 81-84. Deshpande, page 2381.

17 *Padma Purana*, V. 15. 42b-46. Deshpande, page 2371.

18 See, for example, Sukumari Bhattacharji, *Women and Society in Ancient India* (Calcutta: Basumati Corporation Ltd 1994), 86. For an opposing view, see David Kinsley,

Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), and Samjukta Gombrich Gupta, "The Goddess, Women, and the Rituals in Hinduism," in *Faces of the Feminine in Ancient, Medieval, and Modern India*, ed. Mandakranta Bose (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), 87-123.

19 See "Shiva Purana: The Birth of Kartikeya," in Vanita and Kidwai, *Same-Sex Love in India*, 77-80.

20 Mark D. Jordan, *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago press, 1997), 17.

21 *Same-Sex Love in India*, 101.

22 See "Shiva Purana: The Birth of Ganesha," in Vanita and Kidwai, *Same-Sex Love in India*, 81-84.

23 Mark Jordan, *op cit.*, 175.

24 For further analysis of this paradigm, see Ruth Vanita, *Sappho and the Virgin Mary: Same-Sex Love and the English Literary Imagination* (New York: Columbia University Press),

25 See "The Embrace of Shiva and Vishnu," and my essay, "Ayyappa and Vavar: Celibate Friends," in Vanita and Kidwai, *Same-Sex Love in India*, 69-71 and 94-99.

26 See Alfred M. Hillebrandt, *Vedic Mythology*, trans. S. Rajeswara Sarma (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1990).

27 The *Bhagavata Purana* (IX. 14.49) provides a heterosexual interpretation of the *aranis*. In the *Mahabharata*, however, only the mother is identified with the fire-stick. A passage extolling the importance of the mother as the dearest of all beings notes "Of this union of the five elements in me due to my birth as a human being, the mother is the cause as the fire-stick of fire" (*Santi Parva* Part II, CCLXIII). A more intellectualized reading occurs in the discourse of a Brahmana to his wife, recounted by Krishna to Arjuna: "intelligence devoted to Brahman is the lower Arani; the preceptor is the upper Arani . . . From this is produced the fire of knowledge" (*Aswamedha Parva* XXXIV). Theosophist Madame Blavatsky commented that the secret mystical meaning of the female arani had been "perverted into phallic significance" by a materialist later age (H. P. Blavatsky, *Theosophical Glossary*, New York: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1892).

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