

Article

Doing Dialogue Differently: Queer Interfaith Perspective

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Abstract: This paper attempts to bring queer perspectives to interfaith dialogue in India. It will first consider what is interfaith dialogue and will situate interfaith dialogue within the framework of a theology of religions and a theology of missions. It will then offer an evaluation of some works accomplished by National Council of Churches in India with regard to the question of interfaith dialogue and sexuality. Finally, it will look at whether Christians in interfaith dialogue can learn anything from a queer reading of Hindu sacred texts.

Keywords: interfaith dialogue; Hinduism; queer gods; hyper-masculinity

1. Introduction

This paper attempts to do three things. Firstly, it considers what is interfaith dialogue, its necessity and forms, and it situates the question of interfaith dialogue within the framework of a theology of religions and a theology of mission. Secondly, it looks at and evaluates some of the work accomplished by the National Council of Churches in India with regard to the question of interfaith dialogue and sexuality, particularly in light of the controversial Section 377. Finally, it looks at whether Christians in interfaith dialogue can learn anything from a queer reading of Hindu sacred texts.

In a multifaith context such as India, dialogue continually occurs, whether in academic circles, the professional field, or even the marketplace. In the academic field, scholars usually engage in conversations over doctrine (Ariarajah 2017). However, we need to deepen dialogue by including those abandoned by religion. In this paper, I will argue that queer folx can find different resources towards different ends or goals for interfaith dialogue. This formulation of alternative resourcing warrants the decolonisation of hyper-masculine nationalist spaces, religious texts, and conversations (Upadhyay 2020). This paper will briefly examine how Christian ecumenical circles in India have undertaken interfaith dialogue, the significance of queer folx within this dialogue, and how we can learn from each other's religion by offering specific examples from Hinduism. This conversation will hopefully provide the possibility of negotiating mutual vulnerability and offering spaces through interconnectivity and transformational change.

2. Interfaith Dialogue

"How could we talk about God as though only we had something to say on the experience of being touched by God's grace?" Wesley Ariarajah (2017, p. ix), a Lutheran theologian from Sri Lanka, asked this question in the context of education in seminaries. This question resonates even with Christians in India. Christian monotheistic religion is challenged in its relation to the beliefs of other faiths, especially in the context of India. On the one hand, India is known for its plural society and religious diversity. On the other hand, despite India being a secular democratic country with diverse religions, cultures, and traditions, it has been the locus of inter-faith and interreligious violence.

In such a context as India, religious plurality on the one hand and religious conflict on the other necessitate interreligious dialogue. In the face of religious pluralism and conflicts, interfaith dialogue is an attempt to bring different religions to dialogue. In this dialogue,



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the religious convictions of religious representatives often result in peaceful arrangements and sometimes in hostile debates. Sometimes, it also offers significant shifts and new insights into one's self-understanding of one's religion (Cornille 2013a, pp. xiii–xiv).

2.1. Forms and Framing of Interfaith Dialogue

There are various forms of dialogue (See Cornille 2013b; World Council of Churches n.d.); however, this paper calls on interfaith dialogue to see queer folk as dialogue partners and that queer folk contribution, particularly as those abandoned by religion, make invaluable dialogue partners. It calls religious representatives to side with and listen to queer folk who are abandoned, oppressed, and marginalised by religion.

Leonard Swidler (2014, pp. 16–17), an American scholar of interfaith dialogue, offers four different models of interfaith dialogue. He suggests that the “dialogue of the head” is the cognition or intellectual approach to seek the truth from other faiths. The “dialogue of the hands” is the illative or ethical approach to joining hands with other faiths to heal the world. The “dialogue of the heart” is the affective aesthetic approach to seeking the beautiful and spiritual experience of other faiths. He finally offers the “dialogue of the holy” as the approach to bring the head, hands, and heart into harmony as *Holos/whole*.

Further, on the question of justice, Peniel Rajkumar (2021, pp. 698–701), an Indian theologian, adds to the model, the “dialogue of the heels”. He says that it is a bottom-up dialogue that reflects on the agency and contributions of the marginalised communities that were traditionally excluded as dialogue partners.¹ He affirms that “in the context of dialogue, justice becomes the oil that enables the wick of faith to burn brightly as hope in the context of mutually edifying love that is both transformed and transformative” (Rajkumar 2021, p. 701). Perhaps, Rajkumar's prophetic model of dialogue of the heels that emerges from the preferential option of the marginalised communities, along with other grassroots movements, can pave a way forward to align and commit to deep solidarity with those who are crushed by injustices.

Interfaith dialogue, further, can be understood in two aspects of Christian theology. Within the theology of religions, the exclusive approach affirms the uniqueness and finality of Christ, the inclusive approach considers other faiths as valid however, only through Christ, and the pluralistic approach considers all religion as valid and equal but denies the finality of all religions. These approaches to religion sustain the dynamic of power within certain religion. With these limitations, K. P. Aleaz, an Indian theologian of religions, proposed pluralistic inclusivism.

Pluralistic inclusivism is a step where many Christians are challenged to self-reflect critically. Pluralistic inclusivism not only posits the validity of all religious traditions but opens up the possibility to learn from each. He gives complete authority to Advaita Vedanta (translated as nondualism) a Hindu philosophical school as a hermeneutical key to interpret Jesus and the bible. Advaita Vedanta believes in the Ultimate Reality also known as Brahman. In Brahman, both the human and divine dwell, and they are one and nondual. Aleaz attempted to interpret Jesus from other traditions as way out of Christian exclusivism and as a fulfilment of Christian thought and interpretation. In this way, Christian faith is pluralistic and inclusive, and posits that Godself can be found in other faiths and practices as well (Aleaz 2005, 2008).

Another framing of interfaith dialogue can be found within the context of the theology of missions. In most Christian understanding and mission, the other is understood through convincing and conversion. The missional approach of peacebuilding and reconciliation is seen in times of religious conflict. This, however, mostly occurs among elite religious leaders who are often reduced to discussing doctrinal truths than that of those who suffer as a result of caste, gender, sexuality, racism, and ethnonationalism. There is also another missional perspective that also offers space to learn from other faiths.

Interfaith Dialogue and Power

Rajkumar (2021, pp. 679–80) reminds us that dialogue is impossible without addressing power imbalances and, therefore, at the heart of honest and deep dialogue must necessarily be the question of justice.

In a multifaith context such as India, interfaith dialogue is a way of life. It is spontaneous and not a conscious, intentional step to understand another's religion and spirituality. Many Christians are willing to have a dialogue and have transactional relationships with people of other faiths. Sometimes other faiths are understood as missional or a gospel outreach mission. Exclusive theological and biblical interpretations such as "Jesus is the only way" make it difficult to see the divine in other faiths. While Hinduism accommodates diverse religious movements and spiritualities, Ariarajah (2017, pp. 201–2) reminds that it must recognise that not every religion shares its ethos of accommodating limitless diversity. However, this is the dominant discourse and has found its place within the nationalist narrative of India, where dialogue is presented as a way of life, but it is not life-affirming. Dialogue only seems to manifest at a superficial level without taking into account the dynamics of power and the complexities thereof.

What is necessary is an intentional interfaith dialogue that sees people of other faiths as "partners with us in the same pilgrimage" (Ariarajah 2017, p. 23). It simultaneously calls us to be critical of power imbalances. "Dialogue calls us out of our closed and intolerant ways to mutuality and genuine relationship" (Ariarajah 2017, p. 27). In dialogue, witness takes place through sharing each other's message and convictions. It aims to understand diverse religious worldviews and acknowledge the divine in various religious and spiritual traditions (Ariarajah 2017, p. 202). As Swidler, puts it,

The epistemological assumption underlying dialogue is that Nobody knows everything about anything." . . . Hence, the primary aim of interreligious dialogue is for the dialogue partners to learn something about the ultimate meaning of life that they did not know solely from their own religious perspective.

(Swidler 2014, p. 12)

Dialogue thus offers space to learn from each other and enter into a new self-understanding of their religion. It is to listen to and be willing to learn from other faiths and re-evaluate one's ways of reading authoritative scriptures, spirituality, and religiously sanctioned social hierarchical practices. It further requires the excavation of marginal traditions and texts. It requires openness and vulnerability, which toxic masculine religion does not offer.

Interfaith dialogue then can be considered as an attempt to dialogue with other faiths that takes justice as a prophetic call to side, listen, learn from other faiths, and be transformed through the interpretations of other faiths.

2.2. Interfaith Dialogue in Ecumenical Circles

The 1893 World Parliament of Religions held in Chicago was regarded as the formal gathering of interfaith dialogue worldwide. Many Americans for the first time heard and witnessed the missional approach of the Hindus, Buddhism, Jews, Islam, and Christians in this conference (Knitter 1985, p. 18). The awareness of religious pluralism in Western countries further propelled Christian missions to non-Christian countries through the formation of the International Missionary Council in 1921 born out of World Missionary Conference, 1910 in Edinburgh. It further led to the formation of the World Council of Churches (WCC), a worldwide inter-church organisation in 1948. The WCC were faced with questions of other religions. The WCC then formed a Dialogue unit (Ariarajah 2019). The missionary movement inspired the emergence of ecumenical organisation that began its work to dialogue with other faiths.

Ariarajah (2017, p. 21), in his work, *Strangers or Co-Pilgrims?* narrates the controversy at the fifth assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1975. At that time, interfaith dialogue was relatively new to the WCC. There were sincere questions about Christian mission, the dangers of syncretism, and the purpose of dialogue.² Moving forward in 2015,

the Council for World Mission, a Christian mission organization, conducted a symposium on “Interfaith engagement towards building life”, in Kolkata, India. On the last day, concerns about the precedence of dialogue over action were raised. Perhaps it was and continues to remain a legitimate concern where interfaith dialogue is seemingly focused on harmony and peace while circumventing or subsuming justice issues to superficial notions of harmony (Rajkumar 2021). It highlights how far interfaith dialogue in ecumenical circles has developed in the last fifty years.

3. The Queer Question and the Religious Question in India

Having placed dialogue into a larger ecumenical framework, we now turn our attention to the work of the National Council of Churches in India (NCCI), an ecumenical church organisation on matters of gender, sexuality, and interfaith dialogue. The Ecumenical Solidarity on HIV and AIDS (ESHA) project under the National Council of Churches in India (NCCI), an ecumenical church organisation, and the Board of Theological Education of the Senate of Serampore College (BTESSC) has been extensively working on developing training modules to train church leaders, theological students, and laity on gender identities and human sexuality that are directed towards an inclusive church and community. The National Ecumenical Forum for Gender and Sexual Diversities (NEFGSD) of the NCCI’s Commission of Justice, Peace, and Creation (CJPC) also closely works with LGBTQI+ activists and allies from churches (“ESHA-NCCI” n.d.). These Christian movements have led to a larger conscientisation among theological students, church leaders, and laity. However, perhaps, we need to take this conversation further.

In India, in 2009, the Delhi high court decriminalised colonial sodomy laws. Falling under Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code,³ this law sought to criminalize “unnatural sex” and was often used to harass those from the queer community. The law was reinstated in 2013, a result of religious leaders of several faith supporting homophobia. However, the attempts to strike it down continued. It resulted from a prolonged struggle for justice by the queer community in India. This fight to read down colonial sodomy laws was considered a decolonising act (Upadhyay 2020). Alongside the struggle to change Section 377 as encoded in the Indian constitution, there have also been interfaith workshops to re-interpret oppressive texts encoded in scriptures.

In 2014 and in 2018 along with Aneka, a sexual minority rights group, these NCCI bodies organised an “Inter-Faith Round Table on Religion and Sexuality” and a “National Consultation for an Interfaith Response to Human Sexuality and Gender” simultaneously. The consultations were organised as an interfaith response to Section 377, which criminalises homosexuality (Ratnam 2018).⁴ The consultation, joined by queer people of faith, faith leaders, and allies, denounced Section 377. An excerpt of the 2018 meeting’s joint declaration states,

We believe that love is the basis of all religions and hatred can have no place. However, historically there have been dominant interpretations that have been used to perpetuate oppressive systems against these minorities. As a result, gender, sexual and sexuality minorities are often rejected and alienated by many religious leaders and faith communities.

We see faith leaders and faith communities as allies and not as adversaries. We therefore recognise the need to understand and celebrate gender, sexual and sexuality identities within their respective faith perspectives. Through the deliberations of this consultation, we have come to recognise the innate ability of each faith community to understand, accept and celebrate gender, sexual and sexuality identities. We thereby recognise the presence of such identities within each faith community and encourage faith leaders to acknowledge, accept, nurture and continue conversations in the most inclusive manner.

(David 2018)

In a historic victory in 2018, the Indian Supreme Court read down Section 377 of Indian Penal Code which criminalises “unnatural” sex between consenting same-sex adults. However, the stereotype and discrimination against queer folx still pervade society. Further, given the context of religious persecution of Christians, Muslims, and minorities by the majority Hindu, this declaration is important. Particularly important is the common emphasis on love as the basis of all religions, which is an important point of departure for interfaith dialogue on the question of gender and sexuality.⁵ From a justice perspective, this declaration creates the necessary framework for a queer interfaith dialogue or a dialogue that is genuinely inclusive.

With this in mind, we will look at ways of queer folx doing dialogue in and out of faith traditions.

4. Queer in Interfaith Dialogue

Interfaith dialogue aims to understand each other and find commonalities for harmonious relationships and peacebuilding. However, it fails to do so. Most of the participants in the interreligious dialogue are intellectuals who engage in theological conversations (dialogue of the head). Traditional doctrine lies at the centre of interfaith conversations, and as we know, what is “doctrine” is often the ideology of the powerful. Present formulations of interfaith dialogue discuss differences and similarities or draw parallels to find common threads among the religions aimed at a harmonious relationship. At the same time, these scholarly dialogues emerge from a dominant perspective and do not translate to ordinary people who live at the crossroads of religious violence. On the other hand, at the ground level, people across interreligious lines often live together harmoniously. Usually, this is because factors of marginalisation create the contexts of a common struggle that lies outside the fault lines of religion.

In the context of interreligious conflict, as much as there are several religious conflicts, it may not always necessarily be communal violence; instead, it could be competition for resources. For example, the Sikh–Hindu conflict in the 1980s in India had an economic basis. However, religion was used as a tool that brought conflict and galvanised religious communities in a struggle for economic resources. In 1965, the Green Revolution started in Punjab. This was a process of the “modernisation” of agriculture in India. The Sikhs, who constituted the majority in rural parts of the Punjab state, had to depend on the urban-based Hindus who controlled trade and commerce. The wealthy Sikhs used religion to mobilise and unite against the Hindus, who controlled the economic and political base. This further heightened complex religious, political, and economic conflict (Lutz 2017).

While in interfaith dialogue, religious differences are observed as the most significant difference that needs to be overcome, on the other hand, religious opinions and theologies also have dominant interpretations that exclude the other and discriminate against presumed religious dissidents. Queer folx and different dominated castes, classes, and races are largely ostracised in several religions. They are made victims of physical, mental, and religious abuse. Religious division and conversations do not matter much for the marginalised, who are already excluded from mainstream religion. In fact, in many cases, religious doctrine, texts, and narratives are invoked as a justification for their marginalisation.

However, in a queer liberation interfaith quest, we actively seek out those marginalised and abandoned by religion. Hinduism and Christianity have separate worldviews; therefore, the marginalisation of folx is a consequence of such different religious and spiritual worldviews. Many Hindus who convert to Buddhism or Christianity do so mainly due to the constant humiliation, ostracisation, and oppression of caste hierarchy. The perceived democratic or egalitarian ethos in other faiths attracts them. While Hindus also discriminate queer folx, it is primarily shamed based rather than having a religious significance (Pattanaik 2002, p. 10). In the present Hindu-dominated heteronormative society and religion, queer folx are considered deviant even though they have existed throughout history.

4.1. Queer Folx since History

The Indian traditional gender and sexual variants exist even today in different parts of India. The Jogappas in North Karnataka serve in temples under the goddess Yellamma. They are clustered together with or conflated with transgender people or hijras, or eunuchs. The goddess Yellamma chooses both boys and girls to be her devotees. The male children given to the goddess Yellamma cannot be part of mainstream society. Boy children are forced to wear women's apparel to serve the goddess.

Female children called *devadasis* also serve the goddess. The initiation of a lifetime of servitude to the goddess starts when the boys and girls have a fit, rash, foul odour, failure of crops, or death or sickness in the family. These occurrences are considered a possession of the goddess Yellamma, and their ailments were healed when they served the goddess. They carry an image of the goddess on their head to bestow blessings and receive alms. In times of economic stress, they are forced into prostitution. Some believe that the claims of divine possession are a hoax, and priests only choose boys who possess certain feminine traits, having no correlation to the possession. However, it is striking that it allows space for gender transgression for boys. The girls, conversely, do not have any possibility of variation. The Jogappas and devadasis receive some form of respect and reverence where they would otherwise be discriminated against (Anonymous 2016; Aranha 2017).

The monks of Vaishnava Sakhi bhava order metamorphose to become women (a tradition that emerged in the late Puranas). They are also conflated with transgender people. They reject masculinity to gain liberation from the cycle of life by identifying with the goddess Tripurasundari, the female manifestation of Krishna (the divine male/the sacred principle of the cosmos). The monks long to be reincarnated as female and live as female since they consider that by identifying themselves as female, they can be the companion or sakhi of Radha, the beloved of Krishna. In this way, they will earn divine grace and be liberated from the cycle of life (Vanita and Kidwai 2000, pp. 18–19).

The most socially accepted “transgender people” are hijras. They are also known as the third gender in India, for they are considered neither male nor female. Hijras are regarded as natural or “born that way” though they are pushed to the fringes of society. Hijras are also misrepresented as ones who do not have sexual desire and ones without a womb or seen as eunuchs. They, however, have an organised social identity. They possess their own hegemonical and hierarchical system, which can be brutal. They vow hijra hood and join their new family under a senior hijra guru. They are given new female names as a symbol of rebirth and wear feminine apparel, and manifest feminine mannerisms. In the past, they had royal and religious patronage. They dress in female attire and, in the past, served as caretakers, companions, and catamites and were given shelter in the temples. They are considered as ones favoured by gods to bless or curse others. They are considered to have a special relationship with the divine. In modern times, they beg, sing, dance, bless, curse, and are often forced into prostitution (Pattanaik 2002, pp. 11–12).

4.2. Queer Folx at Present

Ashley Tellis (2003, p. 1), an Indian academic, critically analyses the modern expression of queer folx in the Indian context. Tellis emphasises that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender articulations are foreign to Indians. These were created and spread from the Western white Eurocentric and North American context. Diverse sexualities in other cultures, such as Jogappas, are subsumed by the dominant colonial forces of lgbtqia+ definitions. Tellis argues that India has adopted a globalised language due to the need for funding and to acquire support from international counterparts against the national regime. In this process, traditional gender identities and diverse sexualities are ignored.

Perhaps, modern definitions and expressions of queer folx are not native to the Indian subcontinent. This is also evident in Hindu nationalist views, but one that erases the existence of diverse gender and sexuality (Vanita 2010, p. 44). Johnson, a Human Rights activist and a writer, emphasises that the beliefs of the Afghans, Persians, Europeans, and/or colonial powers have influenced the idea of queer expressions in Hinduism (Pattanaik and

Johnson 2017, p. 120). Further, toxic hyper-masculinisation in religions is exacerbated by the gendered impact of colonial presence. Banerjee (2003, p. 170; 2005, p. 2) points out that British Christian manliness considered India as the “effeminate other” in martial, moral, and religious terms. Therefore, to combat colonialism, Hindu nationalism presents itself as hyper-masculine by creating an ethnic, religious, and ideological “us” versus “them”. Hindutva, a Hindu fundamentalist ideology supported by the ruling political and Hindu nationalist parties in India, considers that queer expressions are a secular disease in the West. They instead project India as a hyper-masculine Hindu nation. The presence of traditionally diverse gender and sexuality is considered anti-national (Nagar and DasGupta 2015, p. 432) and are perceived as a threat to a Hindu masculine nation. Hindutva may not necessarily support religious plurality or minority rights. They subsume all religions and minorities into the Hindu fold.

Nevertheless, Bacchetta (2022, pp. 134–37), professor of gender and women’s studies at the University of California, points out the re-inscription of queer in Hindu nationalism. Bacchetta suggests that the Hindu nationalists project Hinduism in the past as welcoming diverse gender and sexualities. These nationalists reinscribe queerness in Hinduism by claiming their homophobia is a Western import (Upadhyay 2020, p. 9). It is significant that Hindu political leaders who have achieved high status, such as Dr Hedgewar, founder of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)⁶ party, is portrayed as childlike, a mother, a father, a guru (teacher), and as a deity. To Bacchetta, Hindu nationalist leaders are considered bi-gender and asexual. This is only possible because they are powerful, disconnected from weakness, and given a divine status. Bacchetta points out that this could be read as genderqueer in colonial inscriptions. Bacchetta further queers the crimes perpetuated by Hindu nationalists in situations such as riots. In the 1947 partition of India and the 2002 Gujarat riots against Muslims, the Hindu nationalists mutilated Muslim women’s breasts. They gang-raped them, transforming women into eunuchs and creating a liminal space of male sexual bonding through rape. They also cut out fetuses to eliminate an entire Muslim generation. Muslim men were castrated before they were murdered. To the Hindu nationalist who sees Muslims as invaders, it was a cathartic moment of dismembering the hypermasculine body of the Muslims to an anormative body. To Bacchetta (2022, p. 137), “these crimes queer the perpetrators as makers and rapists of eunuchs and other anormative bodies.”

4.3. Queer Interfaith Spaces

It is evident that queer folx are not only a threat to nation-building but also destabilise masculine Hindu nationalism through interreligious intermingling. There is an intermingling of marginalised and minority groups in the queer grassroots movements, such as in activism, pride marches, or parades. Such movements open spaces for the intermingling of various religious and social backgrounds. For example, the Muslim community has historically celebrated iftar with other faiths. They have invited Hindu friends and other religions to feast on iftar (Chakraborty 2019; Akbar 2022).

Moreover, in New Delhi, the Queer Muslim Project, a social media project, organised a queer interfaith iftar. It created a site for sharing each other’s struggles of being both Muslim and LGBTQIA+ community in India. Other faith communities shared their experiences and prejudices about Muslims and queer Muslims (Ibrar 2018). This queer interfaith space brought marginalised folx and marginalised theologies at the forefront and in solidarity. This raised the possibility of finding the divine in the queer interfaith iftar (see, Althaus-Reid 2000) and perhaps it is in an organic queer interfaith space that people are genuinely in dialogue.

However, queer folx spaces⁷ can further perpetuate hierarchy, oppression, and marginalisation. Bacchetta (2022, p. 137) explains that queer presence is not neatly divided into a binary “us” vs. “them” but looks at how queer inscriptions are used for Hindu nationalists’ glorification while oppressing the other. The masculine Hindu nationalism welcomes Hindu queer, trans, and other gender non-conforming folx if they conform to Brahmanical

values and Islamophobic ideals.⁸ Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, transgender rights activist and an actor, who also took an active role in pushing the Supreme Court to read down Section 377, outrightly supports the Modi regime. She supports the Hindu nationalist regime by being Islamophobic and casteist (Upadhyay 2020, pp. 9–10). In most of her interviews, she claims to belong to an upper-caste orthodox brahmin family (The Shift Series 2014). Whether or not it could be claimed as a strategic conforming to power is questionable. Still, in a caste-based society, one's caste is declared to differentiate from other "lower" castes and religions. Further, queer folx of other faiths, Dalits, Adivasis, tribals, and "frontier" regions such as the northeast of India are portrayed as the queer other who falls outside Brahmanical Hindu masculine nationalism (Upadhyay 2020, p. 6).

Upadhyay suggests the decolonising of recolonised spaces. Hindu nationalists have taken up the logic of colonialism by claiming Hindu nationalism as a hyper-masculine nationalism. An example of this is the iconography of the god Ram in Hindu mythology. Previously represented as one with an unmuscular body exhibiting curves is now the very opposite of it. In the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a Hindu nationalist political party, Ram's modern image and statues are hyper-masculinised with muscles representing India as a strong Hindu nation while overshadowing and crushing all local and regional images of Ram (Gupta 2018, p. 70). Upadhyay (Upadhyay 2020, p. 14) further argues, "Within the Indian context, decolonising the erotic requires challenging homohindunationalist tactics, along with dismantling all colonial, brahminical, and Islamophobic structures".

To do interfaith dialogue differently, one way is to investigate transgressive texts or stories of religious texts and spiritual practices. However, it must be kept in mind that looking back to find queer narratives in the sacred text means being mindful of caste hierarchies and uncovering Brahmanical supremacy that is usually hidden from such narratives. What is necessary is the uncovering and dismantling of a Brahmanical-Hindu-nationalist-masculine ideology.

5. Queering Interfaith Dialogue?

As interfaith dialogue asks, how can we learn from each other for a harmonious living? A queer perspective would ask, how can we learn from each other to dismantle Brahmanical heteropatriarchy?

As indicated, homophobia is not necessarily a Western colonial inheritance that is claimed otherwise by Hindu nationalists. As we examine the myths of Hinduism, we shall be aware critically of homophobia, marginalisation, discrimination, and caste dominance in ancient texts. We shall particularly look at the Hindu texts that challenge the idea of a heteropatriarchal male god in Hinduism that Christians can learn from. We will first understand the contexts of Hindu texts.

5.1. Queer Texts in Hinduism

Johnson, a Human Rights activist and a writer, explains that Hinduism in the ancient and later periods had the prevalence of and recognition of gender fluidity and sexual diversity. Ancient Hindu texts are sources of the earliest way of comprehending complex human identity and sexuality with heteronormative vocabulary. The ancient texts such as the Manusmriti (around 1000BC), Sushruta Samhita (600 BC), the Caraka Samhita (around 200 BC), and the Kama sutra (6 cent AD) have much to say about sexuality. They describe different types of men, those who cannot copulate with women, who are impotent. They do speak of women but less frequently. Women are presented as masculine as they participate in the military, are businesswomen, are aggressive lovers, and are bisexual (Pattanaik and Johnson 2017, pp. 120–22). In texts that emerged during the medieval period, such as the Puranas, the Mahabharata, and the Ramayana epics, there are homoerotic friendships and intimacies among the gods. They may not have been treated as equal to heterosexuals but were recognised, studied, and acknowledged as part of natural diversity (2017, p. 124).⁹ Pattanaik and Johnson (2017, p. 48), a mythologist, also specifies that the Manusmriti

has punishments meted out to those in homoerotic relationships. However, it is more concerned with caste pollution than those texts being anti-queer.

Pattanaik (2002, p. 7) compares the Hindu worldview with a Christian view on queer folk and suggests that unlike bringing eternal damnation with “fire and brimstone”, same-sex intercourse is seen as a “bad habit” and shame rather than with a Christian sense of guilt, dishonour, sin, and damnation. For the Hindus, one’s duty, common to all castes, is procreation. He explains that the god Krishna transformed into a female who fulfilled their duty to procreate. Therefore, to the Hindus, same-sex activities are not a damnation but bad karma if they fail to fulfil their duty, that is, to procreate. Further, Pattanaik (2002, pp. 4, 9) explains that ancient texts such as the Vedas describe divine cosmic relations and absolute truths. The Upanishad text, which is the earliest text, explains that only the divine principle, the Brahman, is absolute and manifests in the universe. The later texts, such as the Puranas, Agamas, and Tantra, also explain that there are gods regardless of sex and gender; those that are visualised as male (Vishnu), or female (shakti), or both (Shiva). Hindus believe in life after death and the transmigration of souls into humans or animals according to their actions in their previous life. Hence, “Masculinity and femininity are reduced to ephemeral robes of the body and mind that ensheath the sexless, genderless soul” (Pattanaik 2002, p. 4). According to some ancient texts, the Hindu worldview is that life is a journey in a cyclical universe before attaining moksha (liberation) from material existence. To Hindus, masculinity, femininity, and caste practices are part of the life cycle.

There are queer texts in Hindu myths, legends, and lore captured in ancient religious writings. These stories encapsulate the worldview of ancestors who passed on their wisdom, creating a worldview for others. Hence, “To understand the unexpressed worlds of a people to decipher coping skills of a culture, an unravelling of myth, a decoding of lore is essential” (Pattanaik 2002, p. 3). However, in modern times, the texts of queer experiences are observed as allegorical and not literal. Those who interpret “subversive texts” are met with hostility, branded as “perverted interpretations born of Western minds,” and dismissed with disdain” (Pattanaik 2002, p. 6; Bacchetta 2022, p. 134).

5.2. Queer Gods?

The Hindu mythology, which was orally transmitted, has several interpretations of the same story, which later became written texts. We see stories of gods as childlike, playful pranksters, loving friends who transforms into women, and ones who were born out of the womb, who are neither this nor that.

The Hindu texts show Hindu gods as playful and pranksters as a child.

Krishna has been visualised as an adorable child, a winsome prankster, a loving son, a charming flautist, an enchanting rake, a caring friend, a delightful lover, a noble husband, a fierce warrior, a wise philosopher, a determined diplomat, a wily strategist, and an awesome god.

(Pattanaik 2002, p. 79).

Lord Krishna, the manifestation of Lord Vishnu, was raised among the cowherds. He would occasionally steal milk and butter as a child. As an adolescent portrayed as innocent and playful, he teases milkmaids, steals their clothes while they bathe there in the river to see them naked and makes them beg for their clothes. Later, Krishna enchants both women, wives of other men, and men with his music who yearn to dance in his presence (Pattanaik 2002, pp. 80–81; Vanita and Kidwai 2000, pp. 61–62).

In Hindu mythology, which is also given a scriptural status, we find that there are tales where men transform into women and vice versa; gods change into goddesses and goddesses into gods or even cross-dress without transforming as female. There are male gods with female attributes, such as Krishna, with plaited hair and red dye on the palms, a nose-ring, and body bent gracefully. It is in this form that Krishna the divine principle is acknowledged as “the best of men (purushottama) and the complete man (purna-purusha)”. It shows that femininity does not diminish masculinity but instead completes men. The

female goddesses with male attributes are mostly understood as those who go to war with a trident. They are usually autonomous or independent who perceive the male fellows as objects of pleasure and to produce offspring (Pattanaik and Johnson 2017, pp. 112–13).

Vanita (Vanita and Kidwai 2000, p. xiv) an academic, indicates that when a man is seen swooning over other men, it suggests homoerotic emotions. We see homoerotic intimacies in the texts. Arjuna, the charioteer of the sun god, Surya, transforms into a woman. He transforms into a woman called Aruni in disguise to watch women dance naked in the court of Indra, the god of devas. Indra finds Arjuna in woman form enchanting and shares sexual intimacy with her, and she gives birth to a child called Vali. Surya, who later hears of the incident, asks Arjuna to transform into a woman so that he can see it himself. Surya falls in love with Arjuni in female form and also shares sexual intimacy with her, and she again bears a child called Sugriva (Pattanaik 2002, p. 49). Perhaps, homoerotic desires were fulfilled through gender transformation, but they fulfilled their duty to birth a child. Further, in the adult male bonding, Rama, the human manifestation of the god Vishnu who now symbolizes the hypermasculine national identity or the warrior god, was in the past portrayed as smiling with his brother Lakshman in a serene place (Gupta 2018, p. 67).

Women, on the other hand, are silenced by patriarchy. For when a man transforms into a woman, they change their apparel and the like. However, when a woman transforms, she walks into the battlefield in “bridal finery” without having to cross-dress. Women did not subject themselves to gender and sexual biological–societal norms of the day. They are again misread or misrepresented as the possession of the celestial god over attractive women. Same-sex sexual and erotic desires among women do exist in temple paintings. However, Pattanaik (2002, p. 14) argues that males wrote ancient texts. Perhaps the paintings and folk stories of women having sex with other women to create a child are written from the perspective of heteropatriarchal voyeurism. He also argues that Manusmriti indicates the punishment for those women having sex with other women. He opines that women having sex with women did exist, but the patriarchal texts ignored or dismissed them.

In the story of Ganesha, several interpretations show that he transgresses heteronormative boundaries that threaten to destabilise toxic masculinity. Ganesha is the elephant-headed god who is the son of the god Shiva and the goddess Parvati. In some versions, it is said that Ganesha was created by Shiva alone, while some say Ganesha was created out of Shiva’s bodily fluids mingling with Parvati. However, in most versions, it was Parvati alone who created Ganesha. In some stories, Ganesha was created out of the dirt of her body, almost parallel to the Hebrew YHWH, who created humans out of the earth. Parvati does not produce but rubs Ganesha out of her body. In another version, Parvati created Ganesha as she wanted a child, but Shiva denied her request, as they were immortal. However, Parvati oils herself with turmeric and scrapes it off her body. She “collects the rubbings which have mingled with her sweat, and moulds out of it a doll into which she breathes life.” She creates a child without (vina) a man (nayaka). She called him Vinayaka (Pattanaik 2011, p. 17; 2014, p. 105).

The Shiva Purana version tells that Parvati creates Ganesha to protect herself from her husband’s constant intrusion into her space. Her female companions, Jaya and Vijaya, tell her to create one who will do as they say and protect them from Shiva. Parvati creates a man and instructs him to guard her door while she and her two companions bathe. Shiva overpowers Ganesha and cuts off his head. Parvati then creates thousands of Shaktis, the female embodiment of her powers. Her unlimited power that could cause destruction terrified Shiva and other gods. Parvati listens to the gods’ plea to cease only if they restore Ganesha to life and be given a god status. In another version, Shiva brings Ganesha back to life by attaching Ganesha’s body to the elephant head that he killed on his way to Parvati’s. Shiva proclaimed him to be the lord of Ganas (army), one who keeps undesirables out (Vanita and Kidwai 2000, pp. 81–84; Pattanaik 2002, pp. 115–16). Ganesha is called the Lord of Obstacles, and the Lord of Beginnings, and his pictures are placed outside the door of the devotees’ houses.

In a lesser-known version, it is said that Parvati's bodily residue flowed into the Ganga River, and it was drunk by Malini, Parvati's handmaiden, the elephant-headed female who later gave birth to Ganesha. In another version, the head was replaced with the head of a female elephant. In Jayadratha's *Haricharitchintamani* version, Malini, who drank Parvati's bodily fluid, gave birth to a five-headed elephant. Shiva cut off four heads and accepted one as his child. While two male gods, Shiva and Vishnu, give birth to a child, it is less acceptable for the two women to give birth in Hindu lore (Pattanaik 2002, p. 116).

6. Conclusions: Beyond Toxic Masculinity

We see Hindu gods transgress the norms of toxic masculinity. This also challenges Hindu nationalists' projection of hyper-masculine Hindu male gods. Krishna's playfulness as a child who steals food, portrayed in plaited hair with a nose-ring and a graceful demeanour, indicates gender and sexual fluidity. Later in his life, Krishna transforms into a woman named Mohini to seduce a demon. We see sexual transformation and conception of children, homoerotic bonding between Rama and Lakshman, and Parvati and Malini. Ganesha, also called Vinayak, which means non-male, transgresses the binary division of gender and sexuality; he is neither male nor animal or both. He is worshipped in various parts of India, and his story focuses on the creation of a man without a male seed or a womb.

These images of gods challenge the male God in Christianity. The Hindu god is child-like, flirtatious, sexual, and non-binary, challenging the monotheistic idea of an old male God. Hinduism welcomes diversity and differences, so masculinity and femininity do not pose a threat. Hinduism requires wisdom and action to be liberated from the cycle of life. Pattanaik and Johnson (2017, p. 126) puts it as, "great value is placed on the infinite spaces of wisdom between all kinds of boundaries. Hinduism celebrates these non-binary spaces. And, as it turns out, this is where the queer resides—indeed, where it thrives—in matters of sexuality, identity, and even beyond".

As the goal of interfaith dialogue is to learn from each other (See Swidler 2014, pp. 26–27), perhaps Christianity can learn from Hinduism the diverse ways of seeing the divine or seeing the divine from a Hindu perspective, as Aleaz proposes. However, as Hinduism embraces all, maybe it sees caste identity differences as part of the divine manifestation and sustains it. In a queer interfaith space, such embracing of anti-life practices has no place. We can learn that in the increasing masculinisation of male gods in religions, looking at the child Krishna and homoerotic friendships and intimacies are necessary, and Ganesh, who occupies both and non-binary, is essential.

As interfaith dialogue engages in understanding each other for a harmonious society, we recognise that queer folx are already in harmony. The different goal of interfaith dialogue for queer folx in India is dismantling Brahmanical heteropatriarchy. The aim is to forge a politics that dismantles our conceptions about nationalism, hyper-masculinity, diverse gender, and sexuality. Tellis points out that we need to acknowledge that we lack our analysis. Our ideas of sexualities are not our own but international concepts. Tellis (2003, p. 1) argues,

The facile multiculturalism of 'Let's celebrate our differences' obscures the role of power in constituting those differences, yet the universal too is frequently implicitly white, male and bourgeois. We need to work through this philosophical impasse here too, to see through the facile plurality of globalising discourse as much as discern the homogenizing processes at work beneath the rhetoric of rights and identity politics as we know it. This can only be done by grounding representations of these contexts in their material bases and building a framework based on praxis more than anything else ... it would need to be rigorously aware of and constantly interrogating the assumptions behind any of its own articulations and the institutions and frameworks it may use to further those articulations. It is only then that we can hope to forge a politics that is truly capable of imagining what we are in the process of becoming.

Tellis explains that in this globalised context, we need to restructure the way we conceptualise our frameworks on increasingly divisive gender and sexuality discourse that ignores minorities and to build a framework based on lived realities.

The goal of interreligious dialogue may differ within contexts and among various religions. What queer perspectives can bring to the dialogue table is the common goal of learning from queer folk who are abandoned by most religions. Queer experiences and transgressive reading of the scriptures and spiritual practices can bring deeper solidarity among different faiths. Queer contributions can bring transformational change. The preferential option for the queer folk as well as of grassroots movements can bring about a significant shift of one's self-understanding of one's religion. The perspectives of the queer folk are a justice issue and hearing the voices of the abandoned and neglected ones is a prophetic call to "do justice" in solidarity. It calls Christian religious leaders and community to learn and celebrate diverse and non-binary images of god; at the same time, it calls on Hindu siblings to dismantle Brahmanical influences in religious and cultural practices.

In spaces such as queer grassroots movements and the queer Muslim iftar, we see queer folk from various religions gathered together. These spaces show a different way of doing dialogue. Here, the organic interfaith dialogue—the dialogue of the head, the dialogue of the hands, the dialogue of the heart, the dialogue of the holy, and the dialogue of the heels—can be observed. The commonality of experience among queer folk in most religions is marginalisation and discrimination, and this brings queer people of different faith and spiritualities into solidarity. These spaces practice harmonious living. Interfaith dialogue is performed here. Religious differences are overcome and eclipsed in the fight against heteronormativity. Here, witness is accomplished—one's struggles, pain, joy, and convictions are shared. Here is a place where the interfaith community sees each other as partners in dialogue. They are open and vulnerable to each other. It is a decolonial interreligious space. This space presents anti-caste, anti-Hindu nationalism, and anti-religious difference. It is an all-inclusive space yet one that negates that which is not life-affirming. It is a bottom-up approach that has the potential to bring transformation. Here, queer folk in dialogue can look at faith resources to commonly develop a resource to dismantle Brahmanical heteropatriarchy and restructure a framework of interfaith dialogue based on justice, mutual love, and transformation.

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Notes

¹ For interfaith dialogue and justice, see, (Knitter 2013; Rieger 2019).

² In the meantime, the World Council of Churches (WCC) in the 10th General Assembly in Busan in 2013, committed to a thematic framework of "Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace" in their programmatic endeavours, WCC's Interreligious Office and Corporation also picked up on the theme and had a consultation in 2015 a bilateral Buddhist-Christian dialogue on gender, sexuality, and power (Rajkumar 2021, p. 674).

³ Like in many British colonised countries, the British passed sodomy laws in India. These were drafted by Thomas Macaulay in 1835. It was then passed on to an independent Indian constitution without any consideration. The traditional gender and sexual variants made illegal by the British were clustered into western concepts of transgender, eunuch, hermaphrodite, transvestite, and homosexual (Pattanaik 2002). The consequence of Section 377 is heavily borne by queer communities.

⁴ See detailed ecumenical involvement of WCC and NCCI interfaith dialogue with queer folk in (R. Rajkumar 2015).

⁵ In India, faith leaders recognising queer folk within each faith may be radical. However, we need to further deepen our conversations beyond recognising the presence of queer folk within each of our faiths.

⁶ RSS is a Hindu nationalist paramilitary volunteer organisation in India.

- 7 The Queer Muslim Project, the Dalit Queer Project, God is love ministry, the Chinkyhomo Project, Transmen Collective, Xomonnoy in Assam, Ya All Northeast, Nazariya: a Queer Feminist Resource Group are some of the LGBTQ+ religious and NGOs spaces. They also use social media to connect, have seminars, and nurture safe space.
- 8 To the Hindu family, accepting their children as gay, lesbian, or transfolx may be a big deal. What is enforced on queer children is to procreate brahmin progeny or pass on brahmin values. A matrimonial ad for a gay son, by a caste brahmin mother said, "Seeking, 25–40, well placed, animal-loving, vegetarian groom for my SON (36. 5'11) who works with an NGO. Caste no bar (Though Iyer Preferred)" Akshay Pathak (2017) points out whether the parents would do the same for lesbians and transfolx. Brahmin and other upper castes preserve caste system. Caste permeates in every discussion. Pathak argues that in discussions such as 'caste and sexuality', the 'and' is a 'language trick' that diffuses Brahmanical supremacy ideology. It makes caste another issue besides sexuality.
- 9 Johnson traces the possibility of why same-sex/homoerotic relations are viewed as inferior in Hindu texts. It possibly originated in the ritual of shraadh, where the male son burns his father, the head of the family, at the funeral. This ritual may have led to the preference for male progeny, and any relation without producing a male child or a child is considered inferior and one who does not fulfil one's duty (Pattanaik and Johnson 2017).

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