Quite a lot of money was spent in recent years restoring a beautifully decorated tomb in the garden of a mosque in the Mehrauli in Delhi. The Mosque was built in the early 16th century for a popular Sufi poet and saint, generally known by his pseudonym Jamali and sometimes as Jalal Khan, but whose real name was Shaikh Fazlullah. He lived throughout the reigns of Sikander Lodi and Babur and died during the reign of Humayan. His tomb befits his fame during his lifetime. One of the Indian tourist web-sites describes it as:

Small but not humble. Upon entering it your eye is immediately caught by the richly ornamented ceiling and walls. They are covered with tiles of various hues and patterns in incised and painted plaster. Several verses compose [sic] by Jamali are also inscribed on the walls. The beautiful and spruce lawns of Jamali Kamali make it a popular picnic spot for Delhites.

With Jamali lies the body of another man, commonly called “Kemali”, but who he was, until recently, has been surrounded in mystery. Various explanations have been offered, including the suggestion that “Kemali” was another non-de-plume used by the revered poet or that he was simply some kind of disciple. More recently, however, Indian scholar and archaeologist

1 Begun during Babur’s reign, probably c. 1528 and completed during Humayun’s reign in 1535-36.
3 See entry at http://religions.iloveindia.com/mosques/jamali-kamali.html
Saleem Kidwai has established that in life, Kemali was indeed Jamali’s companion and “beloved disciple”, an example — as Brinda Bose says in a book review in the Indian national newspaper, The Hindu — “same-sex love not merely closeted but buried eternally in a nondescript tomb while the world — and his wife? — whizz by.”

Another writer, RV Smith, reviewing another book in The Hindu two years later, however, was not so certain of the homosexual interpretation (or even that Kemali was a man):

Sheikh Fazalullah, better known as Jamali, was a medieval mystic and poet. His association with Kamali has been the subject of much weird comment in recent times, with some citing it as a gay relationship. To visit the tomb commemorating the two is an exhilarating experience, though gay activists perhaps do it for other reasons.

The first review in question was of an anthology called Same-sex Love in India published in 2001 in paperback by the prestigious Macmillan in India. One of the reasons the journalist, Bose, waxed lyrical in his praise for the scholarship and content of “Same-sex Love in India” was that its editors, Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai, had shown beyond doubt

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5 The Hindu, 01/12/2002
8 The book was originally published by St Martins in 2000 and had been a best-seller in the West but until the paper-back edition came out, not readily available in India.
same-sex love is not "a disease imported into India" but that our ancestors "throughout history and in all parts of the country" contained amongst them "homoerotically inclined Indians who were honoured and successful members of society" contributing positively and significantly to "thought, literature and the general good".

Bose says not "a disease imported into India" because it has been commonly believed that, along with bureaucracy, railways, and memsahibs, the British brought homosexuality with them. When Britain quit India in 1947 they took the memsahibs home but left the passion for bureaucracy, railways and if not homosexuality, then certainly homophobia behind them. Some people, those with longer memories, also attribute homosexuality to the previous conquest, that by the Moghuls in the 16th Century. They brought with them the sophisticated Islamic culture of the Persian court which, as we will see later, was not without its homoerotic splendours, but the Indians even then were no newcomers to homosexual relations.

Ruth Vanita

In yet another review, this time by Raj Ayyar and called Reclaiming Gay India with Ruth Vanita, Ayyar says

**Same-Sex Love in India** cracks open the clichéd stereotype, held in both India and the West that sees homoeroticism as a foreign import and that India has always gone back and forth between arranged heterosexual marriages and ascetic celibacy.

This stereotype has fuelled the pseudo-postcolonial argument that homosexuality is a decadent Western colonial imposition that is alien to Indian ways. On the other hand, it has also encouraged a patronizing 'let's teach you about Stonewall' attitude on the part of those Western gay activists who see Indian gayness as a fragile, recent shoot that needs to be watered by the springs of post-Stonewall gay lib.

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9 Some historians attribute the escalation in racism in the 19th century, at least in part, to the memsahibs in India.

10 In “Gay Today” at http://www.gaytoday.com/garchive/interview/030501in.htm
On the contrary, Vanita and Kidwai show that same-sex relationships have been affirmed and celebrated in poetry and prose, in mythology, literature and medical treatises throughout the lengthy span of Indian history.

Bose, Ayyar and others\textsuperscript{11} — have hailed “Same-sex Love in India” as not only a scholarly tour de force but also as one of those rare publications which themselves make history, in this case not only giving hope and pride to gays and lesbians living in modern-day India, Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh but also restoring centuries of homosexual tradition once more as a legitimate subject of scholarship.

Saleem Kidwai

The Love of Heroes

About 3,500 years ago (that is, about 1500 BC), the Rig Veda Sambita depicted friendship between men as the foremost sacred ideal. Whereas marriage was for procreation, this idealised friendship was also proclaimed creative and the measure of worth of a man\textsuperscript{12}. The most famous pair of friends in Indian tradition is Krishna and Arjuna, heroes of the Bhagvad Gita and of the huge eighteen volumes of the Mahabharata\textsuperscript{13}. At the end of the first volume, the Adi Pava, Krishna asks Indra, the king of the gods, for the boon of eternal friendship with Arjuna. Both Arjuna and Krishna are divine, incarnated in human form with the mission to fight unrighteousness. They live together in the forest, in a state of mystical oneness, exemplars of perfect friendship. At the same time, Krishna is married and has children. Arjuna, who is also Krishna’s cousin, marries Krishna’s sister, thus making the bond between them even closer. But, as Krishna clearly states,

\begin{footnotes}
\item See also Ashok Row Kavi, in Gay Today, http://gaytoday.badpuppy.com/garchive/reviews/082100re.htm
\item See Vanita and Kidwai, op. cit. Introduction, p2. The following is based on this chapter.
\item This Krishna is not the blue-faced god of the Bhagvata Purana who dallies with Radha and her milkmaids.
\end{footnotes}
….. Arjuna is more important to him than wives, children, or kinsmen — there can be many spouses and sons but there is only one Arjuna, without whom he cannot live….. ‘My wives, my kinsmen, my relatives, none amongst these is dearer to me than Arjuna…. Know that Arjuna is half my body.’

The love between these two god-heroes symbolises the love for both the human self and for the Divine Self. Of the two, Krishna is more aware of the spiritual than Arjuna is, but he too shows his human self from time to time, particularly in his anxiety over Arjuna’s safety. Arjuna too is protective of his friend: there is a wonderful episode in which Karna wounds Krishna with five arrows. Arjuna, ablaze with anger that his friend has been hurt, lets loose such a rapid-fire volley of arrows from his bow that all the foes flee…. And when the war is won and the Pandavas have regained their lost kingdoms, the two friends take a trip, travelling together through forests and high mountains and revelling in each other’s company.

And when they return to the city, Krishna goes to Arjuna’s apartments and passed the night in happy sleep with [Arjuna] as his companion.

The Kamasutra

Much further forward in time, Vatsyayana’s Kamasutra, also has things to say about homosexuality. Written in the 4th Century AD, this famous and usually misunderstood treatise on human desire attempts to catalogue sexual activities and the different types of people who find pleasure in them. Although Vatsyayana acknowledges procreation as one of the aims of sex, he insists the pleasure of sex is the end in itself.

The Kamasutra says little about anal sex between men except to mention that it is practised by the peoples of the South. What it does refer to is heterosexual anal sex, and specifically when a woman uses a dildo to penetrate a man who has become tired of intercourse. However, there is a suggestion that two men could also do the same. In homosexual terms, the “normal” sexual activity, as far as the Kamasutra is concerned, is oral sex which can be practised mutually by men who are good and trusting friends.

One of the most interesting categories in the Kamasutra is that of the tritiya prakriti, or men of a “third nature”. Later medieval texts equate this with a person who is neither man nor woman, but napunsaka, in our terms, a third or neuter gender. One of the commentators adds that such people get pleasure from doing oral sex. Vatsyayana however, further
divided the *tritiya prakriti* into men who take the form of a woman with breast and long hair and those who take the form of a man with moustaches and beards. He says that both seek the same pleasure but those who take manly form are not so readily approached by other men because they do not advertise what they want.

A little later we will look at the *hijras* who clearly consider themselves a third gender.

While Vatsayana did not take a judgemental attitude to any of the activities he wrote about, later commentators took a more legalistic view, although, it must be said, they were not particularly punitive. In the *Arthashastra*, for example, there are small fines imposed upon men who have non-vaginal sex while the *Manusmriti* punishes a man who has sex with another man by making him bathe with his clothes on. In comparison, deflowering a virgin (and thereby spoiling her marriage prospects) was punished by cutting off two fingers…. And in the *Narada Purana*, men who have non-vaginal sex, including masturbation, are warned they will fall into a hell in which they have to subsist on semen alone.

**Islamic India**

Late in the 10th Century people began to invade and settle in India from what is now Afghanistan and other places west of the Hindu Kush. Led originally by Sultan Mahmud, these invaders brought Islam with them and as their numbers grew, created an Islamic empire within the sub-continent. Along with the new religion, they also imported the cultures of the neighbouring western courts, especially that of Persia which we will deal with in the next session.

**Maasti in Modern India**

“Maasti” is an Hindi word meaning “mischief”, but it pretty much defines the place of homosexuality in modern India and most probably, for many centuries past. Men, and especially young men and youths, have sex with each other quite often in India but this is not thought of as “homosexuality”.
Shivananda Khan\textsuperscript{14}, writing in the \textit{Journal of Homosexuality} in 2001 cited two Indian men as cases in point:

\textit{Prem is 26, married, and has a young son. He does not call himself homosexual; the word gay he doesn't understand, not having access to English. Nor does he see anything wrong with what he does. He is just "messing about." He remembers his first sexual experience with his uncle back in his home village. He was 12.}

\textit{Mohammed, 42: "So when I am hot and don't have enough money, then I know several men who I can have 'maasti' with. A lot of my friends do this."

Such men, Khan stresses, do not identify as homosexual; they don't play "husband" and "wife" roles which they think would be silly since both are men; their "maasti" is simply a matter of sexual desire, opportunity and pleasure. In making the same point, Asthana and Oostvogels\textsuperscript{15} wrote:

\textit{Given the constant expectation that a man will eventually marry and produce sons, he can enter in same-sex sexual relations without challenging his masculine sense of self... Even effeminate men who have a strong desire for receiving penetrative sex are likely to consider their role as husbands and especially fathers to be more important for their self-identification than their homosexual behavior.}

In a survey of the sex lives of urban married women, Savara and Shridhar\textsuperscript{16} found that 12 percent of unmarried men and 8 percent of married men had had their first sexual experience with another man and that most of them had it while they were still teenagers. Of these men, over 20% claimed they had had sex with more than ten other males. In another study, Ahmed\textsuperscript{17}, in his now almost famous 1992 study of truck drivers in Northern India, reported that 15 percent of them claimed to have homosexual experience.

\textsuperscript{15} Asthana, S; and Oostvogels, R: The social construction of male homosexuality' in India: implications for HIV transmission and prevention. Published in \textit{Social Science & Medicine}, vol 52, 2001.
The problems of getting reliable statistics from surveys into sexual behaviour are well-known and most figures in most scientific articles tend to be conservative estimates at best. Bearing that in mind, from the few studies reported above, something in excess of a fifth of the male population have sex with other males which, in general they do not considered to be “homosexual” or “gay”, just a pleasurable, normal part of life.

This then is properly not a variation on what Werner called the “biche/bofe” model of homosexuality in that essential to that model was the pairing of men according to their active/passive proclivity and their perceived masculinity/effeminacy. Nor is it one in which age is a significant factor as it is in a pederastic model: the choice of sexual partner in modern India seems to be more related to desire and opportunity than to the relative age of the partners.

To quote Asthana and Oostvogels\textsuperscript{18} once again,

\begin{quote}
Thus, to be receptive in homosexual encounters does not necessarily denote loss of manhood. Nor does it imply passivity and a subordinate class. This aspect of male-male sexual relations in India differs markedly from other contexts such as Latin America \ldots \ldots where active / passive and dominant / subordinate meaning are associated with sex role. Instead, emphasis is placed on giving and receiving pleasure. This allows for a greater equality of status between partners.
\end{quote}

Desire and opportunity then, seem to be more important than demographics in this Indian model. Anyone who has travelled by rail in India will know how “busy” the men’s toilets are at railway stations, particularly in the larger cities, with men seeking casual sex with other men. But opportunities also abound with family members and other relatives, neighbours, work-mates and with friends. And, as one of the men who took part in Shivananda Khan’s survey\textsuperscript{19} exclaimed when asked about privacy — which you might expect to be in limited supply in a place as over-crowded as India — "Privacy? What privacy? I share a

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{18} Op. cit.
\textsuperscript{19} Shivananda Khan, Op. cit.
\end{flushright}
room with three older brothers, and I have sex with all of them.”

**Other caste, other gender — Hijras**

In modern India there are more than 50,000 men who belong not only to a caste of their own but also to a third gender. They dress and adorn themselves as women and earn their living through a mixture of public dancing and prostitution. While they are commonly regarded as eunuchs, not all have been castrated although most consider emasculation desirable because it is believed to confer special powers upon them. These third-gender people are called *hijras* and are found mostly in India, especially in big cities such as Bombay, Delhi, Hyderabad and Ahmedabad. Smaller communities of *hijras* also live in Pakistan and Bangladesh but are not as well-known as their Indian sisters.

![Hijra dancing](image)

*Hijra dancing – photo: Dennis Drenner*^20^

Traditionally *Hijras* turn up — usually uninvited — at important social functions, particularly at weddings or celebrations for the birth of a male child, where they drum, dance and sing until they are given enough *badhai*, usually in the form of money, food or cloth, to persuade them to go away. When a host is unwilling to give *badhai* or gives too little, the

^20^ Drenner, Dennis: *The Hijras of Pakistan, a photo essay*, at http://www.ars-rhetorica.net/Queen/Volume11/Articles/IntroDennis.html
hijras “turn up the heat” so to speak, increasing their licentious behaviour, even exposing themselves, until the hosts are so embarrassed that they give them what they demand. In return, it is claimed by the hijras and believed by some of their hosts that their attendance at a wedding will increase the groom’s fertility and bring good-luck to baby boys.

No one quite knows what the origins were of the hijras but their emphasis upon castration and their practice, like Moslems, of being buried rather than cremated as is normal in Hindu India, supports their contention they originated among the eunuchs of the Mughal courts. On the other hand, hijras identify with many of the Hindu religious figures who change gender, particularly the Lord Shiva who has female forms, and the hero of the Mahabharata, Arjuna, who lived as a eunuch for a year while in exile. Their mother-goddess however, is Bahuchara Mata and her temple in Gujarat is regarded as their cultural centre.

Although sensational headlines in tabloid newspapers from time to time encourage the belief that hijras kidnap young boys to castrate and make them into hijras, in fact their entry into this life seems to be of their own volition. Usually they live in a kind of commune with five or more “chelas” or disciples under the leadership of a “guru”. Chelas adopt the

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21 Drenner, op cit.
guru’s surname and enter her “house” (a fictive lineage of which there are seven). Any money or other badhai a hijra earns from dancing, begging or prostitution, is handed over to the guru who is responsible for the upkeep and welfare of each of her chela. She also trains her in singing, dancing, make up and the other arts of her new life. And note the feminine pronouns: hijras always refer to themselves as “she” and expect others to do likewise even though they believe themselves to be a third gender and never attempt to “pass” as women: they are always easily recognized as hijras!

In hijra belief, castration changes a man into a more powerful being:

A special power emerges when the male dies and is replaced with a new person, someone not male and not wholly female either. The operation is a traditional ceremony, for which written records date its existence to the 19th century, and oral history dates its existence even earlier. The operation is performed exclusively within the hijras domain. During the operation, all the male organs are removed. Because the act is forbidden by Indian law, it is performed secretly.22

Indian society is changing and modernization has forced hijras more and more into prostitution as their other sources of income have waned. HIV/AIDS has also greatly impinged on their way of life. Societies to promote AIDS awareness and human rights issues, such as Hijra Kalyan Sabha and Dai Welfare Society, have been established in recent times while a hijra guru was elected to a state legislature in 2000 and others have been elected mayors of their town.

It is clear from this that not only do the hijras see themselves as a third gender, neither man nor woman, but the general public accept this view and with it, the hijras themselves even though, at times, they might be socially embarrassing!

And a final word

The last word on gay sex in India I want to give to an Indian writer whose work I admire greatly. Born in Kolkata in 1952, Vikram Seth is the son of a successful business man and the first woman to become a High Court

judge in India. Although he had earlier literary successes, he hit the world stage in 1993 with his best-seller, the huge novel A Suitable Boy. Dividing his time between London and India, he has a foot in each camp, so to speak…. And he summed up those camps when he wrote his poem,

**Dubious**

Some men like Jack  
And some like Jill;  
I’m glad I like  
them both; but still

I wonder if  
This free-wheeling  
Really is an  
Enlightened thing —

Or is its greater  
Scope a sign  
Of deviance from  
Some party line?

In the strict ranks  
Of Gay and Straight  
What is my status?  
Stray? Or Great?

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23 The novel is 1349 pages long.