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Society

Guyana's Hindus Face Gay Quandry

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

By the editors with Vidyaratha Kissoon, Georgetown, Guyana

If modern science is right--and sometimes it is--there are more than 50 million homosexual and bisexual people in India, 15 million in the US and 30,000 in Guyana. The role, aspirations and rights of this large segment of society (and, in the minds of some, their wrongs) is a hot topic throughout this tropical nation. Guyanese Hindus, nearly one third of the population, are pondering: is there a unifying Hindu view on homosexuality?

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

Guyana's ethnic heritage is varied--mostly Indian and African, but also Native American, European and Chinese. It is a nation of many peoples and traditions finding their way toward harmony, and its laws reflect this process. Revisions and amendments to the constitution are relatively common, seen as necessary to achieving national unity.

In January, 2001, the Parliament of Guyana voted to pass a constitutional amendment that would forbid discrimination based on sexual orientation. However, this amendment never became law; the president, Bharrat Jagdeo (a Hindu),

succumbed to intense pressure and did not sign it. This left in place legislation which is a legacy of the British colonial period--legislation which criminalizes consensual same-sex activity and cross-dressing. The United Kingdom itself repealed such legislation in 1967, but most former colonies retained these Victorian laws. It was only in 2009, for instance, that India's Supreme Court ruled that its anti-gay laws were unconstitutional.

Guyana's proposed 2001 constitutional amendment would not have repealed Guyana's laws that make homosexual activity a felony.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

Opposition and Another Chance

The debate is complicated by the country's many cultures and religions and their varied views on morality and justice. Who was adamantly opposed to ending discrimination in Guyana? Large groups are not homogeneous, of course. But those against the amendment used mostly religious arguments; therefore, the numbers of the country's faithful play a decisive role. Guyana's population is 57% Christian (17% Pentecostal, 8% Roman Catholic, 7% Anglican, 25% other denominations), 28% Hindu and 9% Sunni Muslim.

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

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

Hindu institutions were almost absent from the 2003 debate, except for a joint

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

Individual Hindus made more pertinent statements. Mr. Vidyanand Persaud, the representative for Hindu organizations on the Constitution Reform Commission, supported the motion, reminding others that "Guyana's international treaty obligations encompassing civil and political rights enjoin the government not to discriminate on the grounds of sexual orientation."

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

National Pride

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

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

Hindu Perspectives

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

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

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

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

Pandit Tillack's views are echoed by many in Guyana. His colleague Pandit Rajin Balgobind feels that non-heterosexuals, who often question why they were born that way, should recognize that their sexual orientation is part of who they are. "Hindu scriptures do not discriminate against people; we are to be respected as our own decision makers. Everyone, including homosexual people, should lead disciplined lives that fulfill dharma, contribute to the well being of their society and do no harm to anyone." In Balgobind's opinion, sexual orientation falls into the

category of kama (pleasure), one of the four goals of life, called purusharthas.

Other equally qualified religious leaders hold differing views. In an article in the local newspaper Stabroek News, Pandit Dhanesar of the Guyana Central Arya Samaj stated that "according to the Vedas, any form of abnormal sex is not right. Since homosexual sexual intercourse does not bring forth children it should not be permitted." Hinduism Today tried to contact Pandit Dhanesar to ask where in the Vedas one could find that dictum, but he did not respond to our attempts.

The Inter-Religious Organisation, an interfaith body that represents some of Guyana's religious organizations, spoke against the anti-discrimination law. It officially supported the view that acceptance of homosexuality is a Western imposition on Guyana. But Swami Aksharananda, one of its co-chairpersons, vehemently disagreed. Swami--a founder of the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh in Guyana, the principal of the Saraswati Vidya Niketan and a Ph.D. in Hindu Studies from the University of Madison, Wisconsin--wrote an energetic rebuke: "We have to be concerned about what is glibly and uncritically invoked to be the position of scriptures on homosexuality. There is hardly any consensus here. While it is true that some religious books consider homosexuality as an abomination, Hinduism, for example, offers a much more nuanced and sophisticated perspective on the matter. Hinduism admits a wide range of sexual orientation possibilities. Therefore, the stridency with which the Inter-Religious Organisation has expressed its anti-homosexual sentiments cannot be shared by Hindus." (Read his Op-Ed on page 64.)

Impacting Personal Lives

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

Religion, ethnicity and social traditions strongly shape the identity of each Guyanese. Religious people who are homosexual wish to retain their religious ties. But even if a homosexual person feels comfortable with his or her faith, the acceptance of society still plays a large role. One of the gay men interviewed recognizes that the Hindu religion advocates tolerance, but he dares not test it in

practice. "Many negative stereotypes of gay and lesbian people lead to prejudices," he said. Another gay Hindu man, who also declined to be identified, says, "I have suffered a lot of pain in trying to live an ethical life, while not being able to sustain any personal relationships. I feel out of place in Hindu settings, where I am always under the threat of being rejected; but I also feel out of place in necessary to achieving this nationhoodgay settings which do not share my spiritual values."

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

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

Outcome

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

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

Pandit Nanda Sahadeo of the Triumph Hindu Mandir, in a letter published in the Stabroek News in May, 2008, reminded Hindus that the exhortation of Lord Rama in

the Shri Ramcharitmanas Uttarkand Doha 87 included the napumsak as part of His creation. "Napumsak," she explained, "means one who does not have the characteristics of either man or woman--a man trapped in a woman's body or a woman trapped in a man's body." Scriptures can be interpreted on many levels, and the debate will continue.

Swami Aksharananda calls for the use of reason, believing the answer for a peaceful and humane solution will lie with Hindu society more than in religious exegesis. Biologist Ian Kisson agrees, drawing on science to point out many examples of diversity in sexual orientation in nature, urging us to talk openly and inquisitively,

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

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

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

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

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

Alain Danielou, French Indologist

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

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

Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami