Our Histories Are Queer

A Resource of Queer and Trans South Asian Histories

Ministry for Ethnic Communities
Te Tari Mātāwaka

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Adhikaar Aotearoa

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Fellowship/ বন্ধু, by Shomudro Das

I made this piece with the intention to talk about the depth and beauty that exists in queer friendships. Bhondu/বন্ধু, friend. The fellowship, the intimacy, the warmth, and unconditional love that I have experienced in my queer friendships that eventually morphs into self-love, self-acceptance. I wanted to see a Bangali village scene, my ancestral home in Feni, scattered with my chosen whānau/poribar. This journey of accepting myself first as queer, then as a brown queer person, then as a brown trans queer person, has lacked the foundation of the cultural wealth I know exists just outside my grasp. So here it is, our past, and what could be our future. Being one with our animal friends, embracing our fantastical selves, doing away with gendered, patriarchal, colonial, and heteronormative ways of being.

If you look closely you will see: a Kinnara watching over the dancing ladies as their patron saint; a thakurma leading a school of fish; a queer reading of Alauddin; lesbian aunties having their chaa and gossip; platonic, romantic, and sexual lovers; palki bearers redefining tradition, gay friendship in various forms, music, and playfulness, and so many expressions of gender.

As a Bangali gender nonconforming trans person, I only had English to define myself. I look to my language, Bangla, which has no gendered pronouns but in which there is still no word to define who I am. Why define myself as 'non binary', a definition that requires negation and a binary as the status quo, when I can embody an excess, and a voluptuousness of gender, that has no limits and can only be defined and understood within my own cultural landscape?

I made this piece with the intention to talk about queer friendships, but what became clear to me by the end was that healing comes from understanding oneself

within the framework of what has come before. For me, that means recognising that I cannot separate my queerness or transness from my brownness, and even though there may not be a word in my language for who I am, people like me have always been here. Trans people are special, we transcend what was given to us, we are able to look past what we can see, and create something new and beautiful and real.

About Adhikaar Aotearoa

The idea for this charity came from the story of Sanjeev, a closeted gay man born into and raised by an Indian family in Aotearoa New Zealand. He knew that he could never come out to his family, because, if he did, he would be disowned and shunned by the people he loved. So, with the fear that had been instilled in him from a young age, Sanjeev pretended to be a certain way. He started to date women, stopped hanging out with his closest friends, and convinced himself that if he “acted” straight for long enough, he would not be shunned from the only people he had ever known. Sanjeev is one of the hundreds, if not thousands, of South Asian LGBT+ people in Aotearoa New Zealand with the same experience.

Adhikaar, in many South Asian languages, means “right". Sanjeev has the right to be free, the right to love, and the right to be himself. In creating this organisation, we are re-instilling the rights that our ancestors had to be queer and trans without fear. While Adhikaar Aotearoa is for all people of colour, we are specifically focused on supporting those with South Asian ancestry. The eight South Asian countries that derive this ancestry include: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

Adhikaar Aotearoa is all about flax roots and systemic change underpinned by our three focus areas: education, advocacy, and support.

Education is all about producing, disseminating, and using knowledge and information in a way that benefits our communities. Education is key to filling the information gaps that many in our community, and wider society, have. We have four focus areas when it comes to education: providing information for LGBT+ people of colour, providing information for the families of LGBT+ people of colour, enhancing the awareness of LGBT+ persons within the South Asian community, and providing education for broader society.

Advocacy is all about using your voice to support and propel a particular cause when things are wrong, or when things are fine but could be better. Advocacy to us is about talking to our communities, seeing what they need and getting it. Advocacy to us is about ensuring that the work we do has a large-scale and long-lasting impact, and manifests the hope that we hold in the world and the promise of change.

Support is all about making sure you are there when someone needs it. It is about listening, caring, encouraging, and organising with a profound sense of connectedness and shared queer politics. It is about ensuring no one feels alone or left out should they seek connections. It is about travelling with someone in their journeys of self-realisation.

We work both domestically and internationally (particularly in South Asia and the Pacific, where many people of South Asian ancestry are based) to create the conditions for our people to not only survive, but thrive. We will never stop.

Introduction

As we were thinking about the kinds of resources we wanted to make, we decided to have a look at the Adhikaar Report and see what our community said their biggest issues were. The one that stuck out the most to us is the discrimination that our queer and trans South Asian communities face from the ethnic and religious communities they're a part of.

This discrimination seems to revolve around one key belief: that South Asians can't be gay, transgender, lesbian, or any part of the queer and trans community, because being queer or trans is a "white person thing". Being South Asian, and queer or trans, is impossible.

But we all know that's not true.

The truth is, queer and trans people have existed in our ethnic and religious communities forever. Before colonisation, queer and trans South Asians were accepted, loved and even revered. But after colonisation, queer environments previously filled with love and passion became environments filled with hate and criminalisation. Colonisation made our own ethnic and religious communities turn against us.

Another truth is that we, as queer and trans South Asians, will no longer accept this status quo of hate and criminalisation. We are reclaiming our histories of acceptance, love, and reverence. But how do we do this? Well, the first step is to understand our histories, to understand what our queer and trans ancestors looked like. That's what this resource is all about.

This resource is for you – queer and trans South Asians. It aims to affirm you and your identity in our indigenous histories.

This resource is also for those around us – our ethnic and religious communities. It's for them to understand that being queer and trans is not a "white person thing"; it is, in fact, something that is indigenous to us.

The histories and identities we discuss in this resource are not exclusionary. This is our first attempt at understanding these histories from afar through some resources available to us at this given moment in time. We recognise that the

histories themselves are not limited by them; they're an initial step, because our histories are boundless and multifaceted.

Before we get into the resource, we want to make a few preliminary points and acknowledgements. First, we aim to use as much of our indigenous terminology as possible. However, for ease, points of comparison, and collectives, we will use Western terms like queer and trans. This should not be taken to mean we are centralising them.

We acknowledge the tangata whenua of Aotearoa, iwi Māori. In particular, we acknowledge Waikato Tainui, in whose land Adhikaar Aotearoa is based, and whose history of resistance and fortitude we have much appreciation for. It is not lost on us that we are only here because of your magnanimity. We will always be allies to the cause of the realisation of Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

We acknowledge Kiran, Tara, and Dr Divakalala, for reviewing, editing, and finessing this resource. They're word-sleuths, and we are grateful to their keen eyes and intellect. We are lucky to have such motivated, competent, and change-oriented people involved in Adhikaar Aotearoa.

We acknowledge Shomudro Das for providing us use of their stunning artwork. To us, Shomudro's piece beautifully depicts historic elements of the queer and trans South Asian experience. We were absolutely blown away when we first saw it, and immediately knew it would work well with the theme of this resource. Shomudro, we thank you from the bottom of our hearts.

We acknowledge our generous funders, the Ministry of Ethnic Communities, and the Rule Foundation. We were provided funding for this resource through the Ethnic Communities Development Fund. We acknowledge this support and sincerely appreciate it.

The Rule Foundation is an organisation set up to administer the estate of Peter Rule, a Royal New Zealand Air Force pilot who was forced out of a job he loved and eventually committed suicide due to the shame that society projected onto him for being a gay man. Peter Rule's story should have had a different ending: an ending where he found love, passion and purpose, an ending where he was able to be

himself. Peter's memory is indelible in the work we do. We do what we do for stories like his, and particularly for those from ethnic LGBT+ communities, to live out their lives as they are meant to.

None of this work would have been possible without grants from these two organisations. We thank you sincerely.

Setting The Scene: Queer And Trans People in South Asia Before Colonisation

In this chapter, we're going to take a look at what life was like for queer and trans people in South Asia before colonisation. We do this for a couple of reasons. Firstly, exploring our histories gives us an understanding that homophobia, transphobia and queerphobia are colonial imports; they are not a part of our histories.

Secondly, it gives us a goal. As we'll discuss below, not everything was rainbows and sunshine for queer and trans people back in the day. But the level of acceptance that we received in our communities was far greater than what we experience now. The goal is for our communities to regain these histories of acceptance, and for us, as South Asian queer and trans people, to reclaim our past.

Thirdly, as we've already discussed, it's so important that we and the world know our histories, because our histories show that queer and trans identities aren't a "white people thing". Queer and trans South Asians have been around since the beginning.

Prior to the colonisation of South Asia by Europeans, diverse sexualities and genders were accepted and accommodated to by South Asian cultures. In fact, there doesn't even seem to be evidence of active discrimination against such diversity prior to colonial rule, bar periods of oppression during the Mughal Empire. This leads us to understand that being queer or trans in South Asia pre-colonisation was seen as all good, and even revered, as we'll discuss later on.

This acceptance is seen in many parts of our history. We talk about some below. Before doing so, we want to make the point that although there was historical acceptance of our identities, that does not mean that discrimination does not exist against such identities in the modern day. Our communities face acute discrimination and violence, and these stories of acceptance are in no way intended to minimise the harm that the community faces.

This acceptance was...

... carved onto the temples of our subcontinent

You don't need to travel that far across the South Asian subcontinent to find temples or caves with carvings of queer and trans people. Some of these temples date as far back as 885 AD, meaning that our queer and trans South Asian existence is over 1000 years old. These carvings, found in places across South Asia including India and Sri Lanka, depict queer and trans people engaging in several homoerotic acts. These include women embracing each other, men getting head from each other, and group orgies – our ancestors were a rowdy lot, weren't they?

... told in the poems of our ancestors

Our ancestors also wrote poems about their sexual and gender diversity. These poems have been preserved through our oral histories, along with written text. One of the most popular kinds of queer poetry was an Urdu form known as *Rekhti*, which is often feminist in tone and quite sexually explicit. In some of this poetry, the word *dogana* is used as a term of address by a woman to her female lover, while the word *chapti*, which can be translated into rubbing/clinging, is used as a term to describe lesbian sex. These poems have been venerated by successive generations.

… told in our religious and cultural mythologies

South Asia was and is a melting pot of religion and culture. All of our religions and cultures, at some point or another, recognised our existence.

In the Sanskrit epic *Ramayana*, it is mentioned that when King Rama sets off for exile, the people of Ayodhya follow him to say farewell. King Rama asks the men and women to go back to Ayodhya. However, once he returns to Ayodhya after his 14-year exile, he crosses the river banks to find people there. Confused, he asks them why they remained after he asked them to return to Ayodhya. They say that the men and women had returned to Ayodhya, but as they were neither (they were hijra/intersex), they stayed. King Rama blessed them, impressed at their dedication. Rama's blessing is one of the reasons why it is considered that hijra are able to cast blessings onto newborns or at ceremonies. We'll explain more about the term *hijra* in chapter three.

In another Sanskrit tale titled *Kathasaritsagara*, a young woman who was immediately taken by the sight of another woman referred to their relationship as "Swayamvara Sakhi", meaning self-chosen female friend. In Western terms, this could be considered a lesbian relationship.

In Hindu mythology, there are a few stories about queer- and trans-ness. In the South Indian myth of *Ayyappa*, a male deity was said to have been born from the homosexual relationship between Lord Shiva and Lord Vishnu. Similarly, there are Hindu deities who have held androgynous and intersex characteristics, the most famous being Ardhanarishvara (which translates to half man and half woman).

Islam historically recognised four to five genders, including male, female, intersex (khunsa) and effeminate male (mukhannath). So, while contemporary Islam centralises the gender and sex roles of the binary male and female, historical Islam certainly recognised a plurality of gender and sex.

… told in our books

Our written texts discuss stories of queer- and trans-ness. There are many examples of this, including some of the Sanskrit epics we discussed above. However, we know there is one that is particularly famous: *Kamasutra*. *Kamasutra* was written between 400 BC and 200 CE, suggesting that the identities and acts it discusses were in existence for around 2000 years. If this doesn't tell us that our identities are ancient, we don't know what will. The author, Vatsyayana, talks about a third gender category, the *Tritiya Prakriti*. If the *Tritiya Prakriti* takes the form of a woman, they are known as *Strirupini* (which, in Western terms, could be a transgender woman). If the *Tritiya Prakriti* takes the form of a man, they are known as *Purushrupini*. *Kamasutra* also talks about queerness – it dedicates an entire chapter to *Auparishtaka* (oral sex), with a passing reference to it being between men! This emphasises that it was likely a pretty common sexual practice.

In the Buddhist text *Vinaya Pitaka*, which contains Lord Buddha's sermons, it's revealed that beyond male and female, Lord Buddha considered there were two other gender and sexual identities. The first, *Ubhatobyarijanaka*, referred to people who had both male and female characteristics (perhaps, in Western terms, someone who is intersex). The second, *Pandaka*, referred to people who were men but had deficits in their sexual nature, and could be categorised even further. For example, the *Ussuyapandaka* was a man who gained sexual satisfaction through ingesting the semen of another man. The *Opakkamikapandaka* was a man who had their testicles removed. The *Pakkhapandaka* was an individual who got aroused in sync with the phases of the moon! Lastly, a *Napumsakapandaka* was a person who had no clearly defined genitals (in Western terms, intersex).

… told in our religions

Many of the religions in our subcontinent demonstrated and still demonstrate acceptance of queer- and trans-ness, despite conservative interpretations.

The Jain religion differentiates between one's biology and their identity. In this way, it sees the difference in sex as being biologically defined (Dravyalinga) and gender as being socially defined (Bhavalinga). Despite the difference between sex and gender often being perceived as the result of Western medical theory, the Jain religion, one of the world's oldest, has seen this difference for a while.

Buddhist and Hindu religions historically categorised gender in three ways, none of which refer to a specific gender identity. The first, *Purusa*, was characterised by the presence or absence of sex characteristics (for example, a penis or vagina). The second, *Stri*, indicated that one had the ability to procreate. The third, *Napumsaka* indicated that someone was impotent. These different ways of assigning gender demonstrate that binary sex and gender aren't the only ways that society can do so, particularly as we currently see it in Western societies.

Prominent Bhutanese Buddhist teacher, Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche, said the following in relation to Bhuddist acceptance of gender and sexual diversity: "Your sexual orientation has nothing to do with understanding or not understanding the truth. You could be gay, you could be lesbian, you could be straight - we never know which one will get enlightened first. Tolerance is not a good thing. If you are tolerating this, it means that you think it's something wrong that you will tolerate. But you have to go beyond that – you have to respect."

… told in our languages

Many parts of South Asia have language to describe the nature of being queer or trans. We'll talk more about languages in Chapter Three, but as a teaser, some Urdu dictionaries denote the terms *dogana* and *zanakhi* to indicate a woman's self-chosen primary female friend (in Western terms, a girlfriend/partner of a lesbian woman). Some parts of South Asia don't have their own specific terminology, but instead borrow terminology from other parts of South Asia – after all, the subcontinent has a shared history, so this makes sense. It's also important to note that many of our languages, like Bengali and Tamil, aren't gendered.

It wasn't a utopia, but...

As we've emphasised so far, there was definitely a general acceptance of queer and trans identities. Even during periods of oppression and disapproval of diversity, like when the Mughal Empire controlled a fair bit of South Asia, queer and trans people did not face legal prosecution. Some emperors and leaders during this period were rumoured to be homosexual and faced no prohibition for this.

We've seen some people talk about South Asia having a genderless society before colonisation. While we can't be sure that this was the case, and we know that South Asian societies were primarily organised around binary male and female sexes and genders. Yet, binary sexes and genders weren't considered superior or the "normal" way of being. Sexual and gender diversity was accommodated into the way that society was structured, and there was a plurality that enabled everyone to exist as they were.

The Big “C” Word: Colonisation

When South Asia was colonised by Europeans, they brought with them finite ideas about sex and gender. They thought that sex and gender could only mean male and female, and that heterosexuality was the only appropriate way to be. Over the course of many centuries, colonisation transformed the acceptance we received from our communities and families into the discrimination and violence that we're often faced with in the 21st century.

Colonisation's anti-queer and trans sentiments were frequently expressed through the law. For example, the British introduced the "Offences Against the Person Act 1861" in India, effectively making male same-sex intimacy a criminal offence punishable by imprisonment. In Sri Lanka, a similar law was imposed by the British. In 1995, lawmakers in post-independent Sri Lanka ruled that the law was discriminatory, but not for the reasons you may think – they added in a provision that criminalised female same-sex intimacy as well.

Some of these anti-gay sex laws have been repealed. For example, Nepal abolished them in 2007, Bhutan in 2021, and India in 2018. However, these oppressive laws remain intact in Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. In Afghanistan and the Maldives, same-sex intimacy is illegal by virtue of law based on custom.

Other laws expressed colonial ideas around sexuality and gender. For example, the British passed the Criminal Tribes Act 1871 in India, which enabled the repression of hijra. This law required hijra to be registered, allow themselves to be surveilled, and labelled as part of a "criminal tribe" from the day they were born.

In Sri Lanka, the British passed the Vagrants Ordinance in 1841, which colonial authorities used to arrest and detain transgender individuals, particularly trans women. Another law passed in 1852 in India meant that hijra were able to have their land or accommodation confiscated, at least in the Mumbai area. Remember, these laws have no equivalents in pre-colonial South Asia.

Another way that these colonial ideas were expressed was through the banning, rewriting, and burning of books. Across the South Asian subcontinent, the colonisers banned and got rid of books that they deemed to be "filthy", particularly those, as discussed previously, that were homoerotic or filled with queer and trans

content. They also rewrote poems written in the Mughal era that had homoerotic themes.

So, colonisation did a few things. It made our communities see us as abnormal and foreign, which in turn made us view ourselves as abnormal and foreign. It made traditionally accepting environments into ones that were homophobic, transphobic and interphobic.

To be fair, some of our identities are still viewed the way that they were back in the day, so we can't say that colonisation has *completely* changed the way that our communities see us. For example, while hijra continue to face discrimination, they were historically revered for their ability to bless people, and this reverence still exists today.

Our Identities

In this part of the resource, we took a look at the different identities that exist in the queer and trans South Asian context. Before we start, we'd like to make a couple of notes.

Some of the identities we discuss below use words that third parties have ascribed to queer and trans South Asians. Some of the identities use words that our ancestors used to define themselves. Some of the identities use words that had a derogatory meaning but now have been reclaimed. Different terms may have different meanings to different people.

Also, this section should not be used as an exhaustive list of queer and trans South Asian identities, as we're sure there are some that we've missed.

On another note, it's important for us to say that some of these terms are quite tough for us to put a Western lens over. For example, the label of gay or trans might not fit very well with a South Asian term. This is okay. Our languages and terminologies have different meanings and we've got to accept that. We also want to say that we're providing this section about identities so that we can gain an understanding of the language that our ancestors used to use to describe their sex, gender and sexuality. We are not doing this to suggest that we should all revert to this language (although nothing is stopping you if you want to) and to banish western terms. We get that there is a big debate about decolonisation in the queer and trans community, and many people are arguing that this means we need to abandon Western labels in lieu of our own indigenous ones. What we think is important here is that our community can self-define how they wish. If they want to use their own indigenous language, that is great. However, if they want to use western terms like queer and trans, because these terms have meaning to them, that is equally as great. We think that like our indigenous terms, Western labels like queer and trans are beautiful. Our community has used these terms to describe their sense of self, often in the absence of other indigenous language that describes their experiences, and we respect that.

One of the interesting things that we've found out about the words that have been used to describe queer and trans South Asian identities is that often, these words can encompass sex, gender, sex characteristics, and sex position (for example, top or bottom) all at the same time! Our language is super unique in the way that one term can convey multiple meanings.

As we go through and discuss the identities below, we're going to do so using a country-by-country lens, as this is an easy way to structure it. We do these for all identities, except for hijra, as this is an identity that crosses borders. When we make a distinction between historic and modern terms, this is not to lessen the meaning of the modern ones. Often, the modern terms reflect ways of being that have been around for millennia.

Hijra

Hijra is an umbrella term that is used to describe people who are intersex, transgender and/or eunuchs. In this way, it fuses gender with sex characteristics. This term is used across India, Nepal, and Bangladesh.

Hijra are feminine presenting third gender individuals, which means they don't identify as male or female. We're using the term "third gender" because it reflects what our research has told us, but we also recognise that it's a highly contested term. Hijra are assigned male at birth, and present in a feminine way.

As explained above, hijra in Sanskrit mythology were endowed blessings from Lord Ram for their loyalty and steadfastness. These blessing include conferring fertility on newlyweds, and blessing newborns in a process known as *badhai*.

Hijra that undergo *nirvan* (surgical gender-affirming procedures) are known as *akkva*, while those that don't are known as *cibri*. Some hijra may use hormonal products known as Sunday-Monday *golis* (pills).

Afghanistan

Shakh and *murat* are terms that queer and trans Afghan identify themselves with. However, as with most of these terms, shakh and murat don't directly translate to queer and trans.

Shakh is a Farsi/Dari word meaning "horn", and refers to men who are masculine and attracted to more feminine people rather than a particular gender.

Murat is a word that combines the Farsi words *mard* (man) and *aurat* (woman). It is a play on words and describes a person who has a mix of masculine and feminine identities and expressions.

Bangladesh

As our friend Shomudro explains above, there doesn't appear to be much Bengali language that describes being queer or transgender. This certainly isn't because we didn't exist in Bangladesh, but rather the historical context of Bangladesh being a part of colonial India. As such, a lot of the terminology that is used in modern India is used in Bangladesh, including hijra for example.

Bhutan

In 2015, the Dzongkha Development Commission, an organisation that aims to promote and protect the Dzongkha (Bhutanese) language, introduced the following terms to the language:

- Bisexual - རྒྱང་སྨྲོ་ར།
- Gay - མཚུངས་སྨྲོ་ར།
- Intersex - མ་ཧེ་ད།
- Lesbian - མོ་ སྨྲོ་ར།

- Transgender - མཚན་སྒྱུར།
- Transvestite - སྤྱོ ད་སྒྱུར།
- Homosexuality - འདྲ་སྤྱོ ར།
- Homophobia - མཚུངས་སྤྱོ ར་ཞེན་ལོ ག།

India

In India, the term hijra has many geographic variants that constitute their own unique identities. For example, in South and Western India, *jogappas/jogtas* are people assigned male at birth who are feminine presenting, and are considered the earthly manifestations of Goddess Yellamma. In Tamil Nadu, *thirunangai*, which means "respectable woman", describes transgender women. In the Telugu language, hijra are known as *kojjas*. *Shiva-Shakti* and *aravani* are also words used to represent transness.

The term Nupa Maibi which translates into "male priestess" describes transgender men priests in India's Northeastern region.

The term *kothi* refers to an effeminate man who is attracted to men, and who assumes the receptive role in sex. *Dhurani* is a term used to describe kothi who live in Cochin. Using a Western term, you could describe them as a twink.

Panthi refers to a male who is attracted to men and tops during sex. They are considered "manly" and present themselves in a masculine fashion.

There are more ancient terms that we've come across as well, but they're used less frequently in modern India. The term *svairini* means "independent woman" and often refers to a lesbian woman. Similarly, the term *kilba* refers to cisgender gay men. The term *kami* describes people who are bisexual.

Maldives

From our research into the Maldivian language, also known as Dhivehi, the following are terms that describe queer- and trans-ness:[1]

- Gay - ގިވާބު
- Lesbian - ލެސްބިއަން
- Transgender - ޓްރާންސްޖެންޑަރ
- Bisexual - ބައިސެކްޝުވަލް“
- Queer - ކްއީރ

Nepal

Nepal is home to many different terms that are used to describe being queer and/or trans.

The term *meti* is thought to have originated in Darjeeling in India, and is derived from a phrase that means “to quench one’s thirst”. Meti is an effeminate male who is attracted to men and bottoms during sex. Being a bottom is the main part of being a meti, given that their gender expression does not always have to be feminine presenting. The term fulumulu is a term that describes a similar way of being, and is mostly used in the east of Nepal. Hijra is also used in Nepal.

Tas is a term used to describe one who is assigned male at birth, who presents as male, is attracted to men and tops during sex. The important part of being *tas* is the penetrative role they assume during sex.

[1] Despite our best efforts, we have been unable to independently verify these terms. They are taken from open-source resources, and therefore may not reflect the best language that people in the Maldives use.

More modern terms have been developed in Nepali and its dialects, which reflect Western conceptions of being queer and trans. For example:

- Gay - Purus Samalingi,
- Lesbian - Mahila Samalingi.
- Bisexual – Duilingi,
- Intersex - Antarlingi,
- Transgender or Third Gender - Tesro Lingi.

Pakistan

There are Urdu terms that describe being queer and trans in Pakistan. The term *Khawaja Sara* is an umbrella term that is used for hijra, transgender women and eunuchs. It is the Urdu equivalent of hijra, and they engage in many of the same traditions that we explained above, including badhai. In the Punjab region of Pakistan (and India), the term *khusra* is used to describe Khawaja Sara, although it is often used in a derogatory fashion. Many khusra believe that their physical body has been entrapped by the female soul, and therefore behave and act in a more feminine way.

The term Khunsa Mushkil describes someone that is difficult to define as male or female. In Western terms, it may be equivalent to androgynous.

The term murat/moorat is also used in Pakistan. As we explained in the Afghanistan section, this term represents people who have both masculine and feminine energies, and express themselves as such.

The term *zenana* is used to describe effeminate men who have sex with men.

Sri Lanka

The *nachchi* community in Sri Lanka is a fascinating and multifaceted group that defies easy categorisation. Their history is deeply intertwined with cultural, religious, and social contexts, making their identity both complex and significant. The term "nachchi" is commonly used to refer to transgender individuals in Sri Lanka. Some nachchi explain that they were women in a previous life and that their current identity is a result of this experience. Many choose not to go through a gender affirmation process, instead choosing to celebrate their feminine gendered subjectivity and embrace key facets of their biological "maleness". The term nachchi is also used by the gay community to describe effeminate males who identify as male and are attracted to men. Nachchi ardently desire relationships with men, and their existence has historical roots dating back centuries.

The nachchi community has an ancient association with the Hindu goddess of fertility. By becoming eunuchs, they attain a semi-sacred status and can bless the health and fertility of newlyweds and newborns. In the Tamil-speaking Northern Province, cross-dressing is part of the cultural fabric, making the concept of femininity in males less unfamiliar.

Some transgender people have suggested that the transgender community should use the Sinhala term, *Samarisi*. This has received pushback because the term describes a same-sex relationship. Others have suggested that the community use the term *Sankrānthi*, which translates to transgender in Sinhala.

Closing with Gratitude

So, there we go! We hope we have shown you that being queer and trans is not a “white person thing”: it is very much a “brown person thing”, or rather a “human thing”.

Before South Asia was colonised, our identities were loved, accepted, cherished and, at times, revered. But colonisation changed this. It made our people turn against us, and direct hate and anger our way.

What this history shows, however, is that it doesn’t have to be this way.

Our people can love, accept, and cherish us again. They have already started to. But they will only be able to do so when we start to love our whole selves, rather than one part. We hope that this resource showed you that our ancestors and their societies were at peace with being sexually diverse, gender diverse, ethnically diverse and religiously diverse, all at the same time. In fact, they were loved for it. We can get there too.

We’ll leave it there for now, but before we go, we want to leave you with a couple of affirmations:

- I won’t let anyone take away my culture or say to me that my identities are not in line with my ethnicity or religion. My queer and trans ancestors smile at me. They are proud of me.

- My identities have been built across generations. They are grounded in indigenous history: the histories of my people.

- I am liberated by the actions and love of my ancestors.

- I accept all parts of me and the value that they hold.

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Don't worry, we didn't make up the information in this resource - we researched and thought hard about what went into it. Here's a list of sources that we relied on:

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