



Opinion Article

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Revisiting LGBTIQ+ Representation in Sri Lankan Buddhist Texts: A Call for Inclusive Interpretation

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As a post-colonial society predominantly oriented toward heterosexuality, it is fair to say that non-heteronormativity has become a 'taboo subject, receiving little attention or inclusion. Having experienced a three-decade-long war that provides numerous examples of ethnic minorities being denied equal rights, it is ironic to discuss the discrimination and marginalization faced by the LGBTIQ+ community as a 'sexual minority' group. Simply using the term 'sexual minority group' reflects how the LGBTIQ+ community experiences various forms of socio-economic, cultural, political, and legal discrimination. The British-introduced penal code, which includes Articles 365 and 365(A) criminalizing homosexuality and the vagrancy ordinance, further exacerbates their situation, denying them equal rights as human beings. In this context, Buddhism is widely recognized as a religion that treats everyone with equal respect and dignity. However, the relationship between Buddhism and the LGBTIQ+ community in Sri Lanka is complex, shaped by both 'traditional' interpretations of religious texts and evolving social attitudes. While 'conservative' factions argue that Buddhist scriptures condemn non-heteronormative identities, this opinion piece attempts to demonstrate that a closer examination of early texts reveals a more nuanced stance toward the LGBTIQ+ community - one that has been overlooked. The author explores the representation of LGBTIQ+ identities in Theravāda Buddhist texts and their interpretation in Sri Lanka, arguing for a more inclusive reading that aligns with Buddhism's core principles of compassion (*karuṇā*) and non-harm (*ahiṃsā*).

When examining how LGBTIQ+ identities were represented in early Buddhist texts, it is fair to say that the Pāli Canon - the

authoritative scripture of Theravāda Buddhism - does not explicitly address homosexuality or transgender identities in the way modern discourse does. However, it does contain references to diverse gender and sexual expressions in some instances. The Vinaya Piṭaka (monastic code) mentions *paṇḍakas*, a term often interpreted as referring to intersex, effeminate, or gender-nonconforming individuals [1]. Monastic rules barred *paṇḍakas* from ordination, but scholars argue this was due to concerns over sexual misconduct rather than inherent moral judgment [2]. The Vinaya prohibits monks from engaging in sexual acts, regardless of gender (Vin. III.21). However, the Suttas include no explicit condemnation of lay same-sex relationships. The Sigālovāda Sutta (DN 31) outlines ethical conduct for laypeople without mentioning homosexuality, suggesting that sexual ethics were framed in terms of harm rather than orientation (Khantipalo, 1992). Interestingly, some Jātaka stories, such as the Sāma Jātaka, feature characters who change gender, reflecting fluidity in pre-modern Buddhist literature [3].

Despite these textual nuances, Sri Lankan Buddhism has often been influenced by colonial-era laws (e.g., Section 365 of the Penal Code and vagrancy ordinances) and conservative interpretations that stigmatize LGBTIQ+ identities. Some prominent monks have equated homosexuality with moral decay [4], while others emphasize Buddhism's focus on intention (*cetanā*) over rigid gender binaries [5]. This demonstrates that Buddhism allows room for interpretation, with society shaping its understanding based on power and authority. One could argue that Buddhist ethics prioritize mental states (*karma*) over fixed identities. Thus, if society revisits Buddhist scriptures with a mindset of compassion

(karuṇā) and non-harm (ahiṃsā) toward LGBTIQ+ communities, the dichotomous misunderstanding between orientation and identity could be resolved.

Sri Lankan Buddhism's engagement with LGBTIQ+ issues need not be adversarial. By returning to the texts' original emphasis on ethical conduct - rather than identity - society can reinforce genuine inclusivity. As scholar José Cabezón (1993) notes, "Buddhism's adaptability is its strength." In a society healing from colonial, ethnic, and cultural biases, a compassionate rereading of the Dhamma offers a path forward while providing inclusivity towards LGBTIQ+ individuals.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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