

TRANSGENDERS: REFLECTIONS IN INDIAN HISTORY

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“Those who cannot change their minds cannot change anything.” — George Bernard Shaw

INTRODUCTION

The Indian Knowledge system is vast and diverse, encompassing one of the characteristics like literature and epics. This characteristic plays a pivotal role in ancient scriptures like Vedas and Upanishads. Traditional Indian culture has often acknowledged a spectrum of gender identities beyond a binary classification. Historically some Hindu scriptures recognise the existence of a ‘third gender’ or ‘Tritiya prakriti’. Which means individuals who are outside the conventional male or female categorization. Indian Knowledge System has its roots in acknowledging diverse aspects of life, and the acceptance and inclusion of transgender individuals. In this paper researcher would like to bring to the notice how transgender played a pivotal role in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, the Mughal Period and British Period.

Third gender or Transgender is a category of people who do not identify as male or female, or neither, both, or a combination of male and female genders. It has formed its independent separate existence marking a different society of its own, and has established itself in areas away and separate from the rest of the population.

In India, today the term Transgenders is *hijra* in Hindi and Urdu. The older name for hijra was *kinnar* which was found to be more respectable and formal than the term *chakka* which is considered abusive and derogatory. Several terms are used across the culturally and linguistically diverse Indian subcontinent to represent the transgender. In Odia, a hijra is referred to *ashinjda* or *napunsakaas* also in Bengali, in Telugu as *napunsakudu*, in Tamil *asthirunangai* (mister woman), *ali*, *aravanni*, *aravani*, or *aruvani*, in Punjabi as *khusra* and *jankha*, in Sindhi *askhadra*, in Gujarati as *pavaiyaa*, *durani*, *napunsakan* in Malayalam. In countries like Thailand, they are called *kathoe*, *meti* in Nepal, and *zenana* in Pakistan.

In the book, “*Life of Eunuch*” , Piyush Saxena states that the terms used to describe eunuchs in India are - *Ali*, *aravani*, *aruvani*, *chhakka*, *hijra*, *jogappa*, *khusra*, *khasuaa*, *kinnar*, *kojja*, *maada*, *mukhannathun*, *napunsak*, *nau number*, *pavaiyaa*, *thirunangai*, depend upon the regions. All of these are used to refer to persons deprived of gender, with very fine nuances about a social or religious context. But the appropriate words used in English are the terms ‘Transgender’ and ‘Transsexual’ and now we recognise them as ‘Third gender’ after the landmark Judgement in the Nalsa Judgement.

LIFE OF TRANSGENDER

Transgender have their communities to live with - a separate world of their own. More esoteric than the common man, the Transgender participate in all festivals irrespective of which religion they belong to. According to Piyush Saxena, he states that irrespective of they being a Hindus, Christians or Muslims they celebrate all festivals like Holi, Christmas and Eid. Their prime festivals they celebrate is the nine days of the *Urs festival* at the Khwaja Garib Nawaz Dargah, and the 18 days of the *Arvani* sacrifice and *Kalash* ceremonies. They worship their Gods, *Yellama* and *Bhachaamata*. They make their laws and everyone who belongs to this community or world has to abide by these laws.

In the book ‘*The Invisible: The Tale of Eunuchs of India*’ written by Zia Jaffery, the Author has described how organized the eunuchs of Delhi are. The writer states that 75 % of the eunuchs are involved in giving blessings at weddings and to new-born babies, while the remaining 25% stay at home. Among the 25% who stay home, 5 % are elite and call themselves Gurus. The rest call themselves disciples or ‘*chelas*’. The writer also tries to tell the reader that in the community of hijras, there is no Hindu or Muslim. Their only religion is the society of hijras as they are those who are cast out by their families. When a *hijra* dies, a grave is dug in the wee hours of 1 to 4 a.m. and the body is dumped there.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

Even though India has made strides in the fields of medicine, and economy, stigmas and prejudices remain to hinder the care of transgender persons. However, this was untrue in antiquity. According to Hindu mythology, transgender people are on par with people of other genders. This succinct analysis of the numerous references

to transgender people in Hindu mythology sheds light on the varied approaches taken to the subject of transsexualism and gender identity modification.

Hijras occupy a special place in Hinduism. India is one of the most religiously and traditionally diverse nations in the entire world. It has a very long history of its own which reflects the customs and usages that prevailed during that time, and the interesting part is that those customs and traditions are still prevalent in the modern century. Transgender has been an integral part of the Indian society for centuries. As a result, some of the earliest literature dealt extensively with questions of sexuality and the concept of the third gender, which was a well-established concept at the time.. The concept of *Hijras* in India is not new either. *Hijras* have been recognised in our ancient history as well.

The Indian Vedas, which are ancient scriptures, had evidence of the acknowledgement of the third sex. Hindu mythology is replete with stories of how the hijras were welcomed into society as equals. While hijras wore both male and female dress in the 17th and 18th centuries, this representation shifted to hijras solely wearing female apparel in the 19th century.

Hijras have a strong attachment to Lord Shiva in his Ardhnarishwar form, which is a combination of half man and half woman. Gendered beings have been socially accepted in India and other non-cultural societies since antiquity, and tales and myths have also been created about them. Based on Prakriti or nature, the Vedic literature clearly distinguishes between three distinct kinds of human sexuality or gender identity: male, female, and mixed. There are three types of Prakriti: pums (masculine), stri (female), and Tritiya (third sex), all of which are Prakriti. The word prakriti, or nature, on the other hand, refers to both parts as one intricately woven and cohesive entity; persons of the third sex are investigated in the Kama Sutra and divided into numerous types, some of which are still apparent today and are typically referred to as homosexuals and lesbians. This group of people's homosexual conduct is detailed in great depth in the eighth and ninth chapters of the second portion of the Kama Sutra, which is divided into two halves. In addition, those who identify as third sex are defined as belonging to a wider societal group known as the "neutral gender." Its members are referred to as napunsaka, which means "those who refrain from reproducing."

While the Sanskrit word shandha can refer to any man who acts and behaves like a woman or whose manhood has been destroyed (the word shandhi can be used to refer to women in the same situation), it is most commonly used to describe men who have completely transformed their gender identity. Such persons do not identify with their physical sex but instead consider themselves and conduct their lives as members of the opposing sex. Historically, castration was not a frequent or recognized procedure in ancient India, and mutilation of the body is strongly forbidden in Vedic writings and is believed to be in the manner of darkness by many. In South India, which has been largely spared from Islamic authority and influence, there is a third gender class known as jogappa, which is comparable to the hijra but does not perform castration like the hijra. They are linked not just to the mother Goddess, but also to Siva, because of their association with Arjuna, the hero of the Mahabharata, because of their eunuchs- transvestite characters, which they play. There are several tales about the origin of the hijras, all of which are debunked.

1. Transgenders in Mythology Aravan in Mahabharata

Aravan also known as Iravan, was the son of Arjuna and his wife Ulupi Naga princess, Like his father he was a fierce warrior. He was offered as a sacrifice to Goddess Kali to secure the Pandavas' triumph in the battle of Kurukshetra. Aravan willingly agreed but had one request that he be a married man before the sacrifice, just so that he could be officially cremated and not buried like other bachelors then. As Aravan's request for marriage was impossible as no lady would be ready to marry someone who would die the next day. Lord Krishna takes on the appearance of Mohini, a beautiful woman, who marries him. On the day of war, Aravan fought valiantly against the Kauravas but ultimately was killed. His sacrifice and bravery are celebrated in the annual festival called Koovagam in Tamil Nadu. Where the Transgender individuals re-enact the marriage of Aravan and mourn his sacrifice and they refer to themselves as Aravanis. Aravan's story reflects themes like sacrifice and duty which in Mahabharata means good over evil, Dharma over Adharma.

Shikkandi:

In the Mahabharata, Shikkandi is a fascinating character in the Indian epic, the Mahabharata. Shikkandi was born as a Princess Amba who due to a series of events sought revenge against king Bhishma. Bhishma had kidnapped Amba for his stepbrother and rejected her proposal of marriage with Bhishma. Amba took on the name Shikhandini upon her rebirth to King Drupada. She raised herself as a male to become Shikkandi, according to the narrative. Arjun recognised Shikkandi's previous identity as Amba, and positioned Shikkandi in front of him while attacking Bhishma. On the tenth day of the battle, Shikkandi rode in Arjuna's chariot, forcing Bhishma to drop his weapons because Bhishma was bound by his vow not to fight against a woman, refraining from

attacking Shikandi. Arjuna ambushed Bhishma with his arrows while concealed behind Shikhandi. Shikhandi thus played a crucial role in both the Pandavas' victory and Bhishma's demise during the Kurukshetra. The androgynous hybrid of the goddess Parvati and the deity Shiva is known as Ardhanarishvara. The significance of Arthanarishwarar, the ideal synthesis of Purusha and Prakriti, varies between the Puranic traditions; it signifies the inherent unity of the masculine and feminine forces.

Brihannala

Brihannala is a character in the Mahabharata associated with the Pandavas. When Arjuna refused Urvashi's advances, saying she was like his mother, she cursed him, saying he would no longer be a man. Indra shortened the curse to one year, which Arjuna chose. Brihannala is the transgender identity assumed by the Arjuna during the Pandava's period of exile. This worked out well for Arjuna, as he spent the final year of the Pandavas' exile hiding as a dance instructor named Brihannala. He instructed King Virat's daughter and her friends in music and dance. When King Virata discovered Arjuna's true identity, he extended an invitation to marry her by offering Arjuna his daughter. Since he had been her teacher and saw her as his daughter, King Arjuna turned down this offer.

ILA

In Hindu mythology, Ila is one of the few instances of a female turning male. There are several origin stories about Ila. Her parents, Vivasvata Manu and his spouse Shraddha, had hoped for a son. After they prayed, the gods transformed Ila into a man known as Sudyumma. The narrative continues with Sudyumma entering a jungle and being cursed to turn female; however, Shiva lessens the impact of the curse by granting him the ability to change his gender every other month. Ila/Sudyumma married Budha (Mercury) during his female phase, and she was expected to give birth to the Pururavas, or Lunar dynasty. In the end, Shiva's blessing allowed him to become a man.

Ramayana

M. Michelraj, in his Journal "Historical Evolution of Transgender Community in India" states that, in the epic Ramayana, the depiction reveals that while leaving the wilderness after being exiled from the kingdom for 14 years, Lord Rama turned back to face his supporters and requested that all 'men and women' return to the city. The *hijras* were the only ones among his followers who felt compelled to follow him on this path and chose to remain with him. Impressed by their loyalty, Rama granted them the authority to bestow blessings on people on auspicious occasions such as childbirth and marriage, as well as at inaugural functions, which were intended to pave the way for the practice of *badhai*, where the *hijras* sang, danced, and blessed those in attendance.

2. Transgender in India during the Mughal Period

Hijras played a prominent role in the royal Courts of the Islamic world, notably in the Ottoman and Mughal empires, especially during the Mughal reign in medieval India. They ascended through the ranks to hold reputed roles in Court. M Michel Raj, a research scholar in public administration, states in his research publication in the Asian Review of Social Science on 'Historical evolution on Transgender community in India' states that during the Mughal period, the *hijras* played a pivotal role in the royal Courts of the Islamic world. Transgender were known as the political advisors, good administrators and guardians of the *harems*. *Hijras* were considered clever, trustworthy and loyal. Transgender occupied high positions in Islamic religious institutions, for guarding the holy places of Mecca and Medina. The *hijras* were seen as intelligent, trustworthy, and passionately loyal, and they were granted unfettered access throughout to allow them to play a dominant role in the politics of building the Mughal Empire. As people of trust, Transgender were able to exert influence over state decisions and received large sums of money for having been close to the rulers of the time. As a result, the *hijras* commonly discuss the significance of their social standing in that period.

3. Transgender in India during The British Period

Hijras used to accept protections and privileges from several Indian governments in the early years of the British period in the Indian subcontinent by becoming members of the *hijra* community, which was formed in the 18th century. Apart from that, the advantages included the gift of land, the right to food, and a lesser amount of money from agricultural households in the specific region, all of which were eventually eliminated by British rule because the land was not passed via blood relatives.

Beginning of Criminalization of Transgender during Colonial Period

While the Transgender community was granted a prominent status throughout the Mughal era, it faced numerous difficulties and barriers under British colonial regulations. Beginning in the 18th century, the

situation deteriorated dramatically with the establishment of colonial authority. Britishers were horrified by the sight of *Hijras* and wondered why Transgender were given such high regard in the Royal Courts and other organisations. By the second half of the nineteenth century, the British colonial authorities made a focused effort to criminalise the *hijra* population and deprive them of their constitutional rights. It is reported that the authorities attempted to eradicate *hijras*, whom they saw as "a breach of public decency", but there is no documentation as evidence.

Tahmina Habib states that, in a historic period Transgender was also placed under the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, to be labelled as a distinct 'Criminal Tribe', and were treated accordingly. The Criminal Tribes Act, of 1871, covered all *hijras* who were involved in the abduction and castrating minors, as well as those who pretended and dressed as women and danced in public places, among other things. The punishment for such conduct included up to two years imprisonment and a fine, or a combination of the two. In this current environment, the pre-partition past of *hijras* played a significant role in the precarious conditions in which they found themselves.

However, the Criminal Tribes Act, of 1871 was overturned in 1952 and its legacy continues to date, with many municipal regulations reflecting the discriminatory sentiments toward specific tribes, especially the *hijras*, that were prevalent at the time.³² However, recent amendments to the Karnataka Police Act, 1964³³ (Section 36A), in a similar line of action to the Criminal Tribes Act, 1871, "allow for registration and monitoring of *hijras* who are involved in the kidnapping of children, unnatural crimes, and other crimes of this sort". The regulations for eunuchs include the creation and maintenance of a register of names and residences of all eunuchs residing in the area under a particular jurisdiction, reasonably suspected of kidnapping or emasculating boys, committing unnatural offences, or abetting the commission of such offences or abetting their commission, among other such offences. Piling protests from eunuchs who feel they have been wronged, for both their names being included in or removed from such registers, and also to be documented in writing.

CONCLUSION

Even though transsexual people have a rich and diverse history that includes representations of Hindu mythological figures and divinities, they nevertheless face numerous forms of exclusion. They have just recently been granted the required social security and the opportunity to become part of society. These people are also vulnerable to prejudice and stigma, which increases their risk of mental and physical health problems. These include having unfavourable working conditions and options, as well as legal and substance-related issues. This marginalised community must be integrated.

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