

Tritiya Prakriti: Transgender in Indian Culture

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Abstract:

Hijras lead a marginalized existence in modern India facing socio cultural ostracization. They exist as limnal citizens of the nation state, facing discrimination in legal rights, education, employment and healthcare. This is a far cry from ancient times when they were accorded dignity and divinity. There is a pressing need for their rehabilitation and social recognition. This should start with an awareness of the ancient Indian tradition where hijras were recognized as third gender or “tritiya prakriti”. Such an awareness should act instrumental in giving third gender status to hijras and a recognition of their rights. In Hinduism innumerable instances of gender fluidity among Gods exist, this is also evident in myths, puranas and lore. In Vedic times transgender enjoyed the status of third gender. Extensive examples regarding the existence of third gender could be found in Kamasutra. Terms like sanda , napumsaka and kliba were used to refer to gender variances. With the advent of colonial rule and Victorian morals, these terms acquired a derogatory connotation and hijra population were deemed an inferior status. This situation has to be rectified and a historical and cultural history of third gender would be a necessary step in this respect.

Keywords: Hijra, limnal citizens, third gender, tritiya prakriti, Indian culture, rehabilitation.

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The International Foundation for Gender Education defines a transgender person as “someone whose gender display at least sometimes runs contrary to what other people from the same culture would normally expect”(www.ifge.org) .Transgender could thus be an umbrella term for a range of alternate sexualities, gender practices , identities and preferences. However, trans gender in India are often misrecognized as hijras. Hijras form a sizeable portion of Indian population. According to recent census there are about 5 lakh hijras in India today. The word hijra is derived from the Arabic root “hjr” in the sense of leaving one’s tribe. They are called hinjida in Odiya, in Telugu as napunsakudu, in Bengali as hijra, in Tamilnadu as Thiru nangai , ali or aravani in Punjabi as khusra, in Sindhi as Khadra in Gujrati as pavaiyaa and in Malayalam as hijada. These terms which are used to refer to the transgenders are often derogatory and are even used as terms of insult. Likewise, hijras also face marginalization and ill treatment from the

mainstream. They live on the fringes of society and are often mocked at and ridiculed. Though bills and rights are passed for their betterment, their position has not changed much. They have few employment opportunities and often eke out a living through extortion (forced payment through distorting life/ work), performing at ceremonies, begging and sex work. They are often at the receiving end of social prejudices. Violence at public spaces and home define their lot. They face extreme discrimination in healthcare, housing, education, employment and law. Kothis who are similar to hijras often refer to feminine men who take a passive role in sex. Hijras in India are often organized into groups or ghadaras with a guru and his group of followers are known as chelas. In some religious cults they practice castration and act as females. The sects that practice castration are often associated with Bahuchara mata, the patron god of transsexuals in India. Similar cults include worshippers of Renuka and Jogappas who worship Yellamma in Karnataka.

Hijras are recognized as third sex and are granted basic civil rights for every citizen. However, they often exist as liminal citizens of the nation state, i.e. though they are citizens of the Indian state as per constitution; their citizenship rights are denied or challenged on a daily basis. In the absence of proper sex education and health care, the prevalence of AIDS is very high among them. With the Supreme court decision to re-criminalize homosexuality, there is a sharp increase of physical, psychological and sexual violence against them. They could be regarded as “sexual subaltern” of the nation state, a term propounded by Ratna Kapur in her work *Erotic Justice*. Hijras are sexual subaltern in the sense; they are discriminated and marginalized on account of their alternate sexual identity and orientation. This contemptuous social attitude against the hijras gets translated into their stereotyping and caricaturing in mainstream culture, literature and film.

There is an acute need for recognition and rehabilitation of hijras in the Indian scenario. This should start with an awareness of the rich Indian cultural tradition where alternate sexualities were acknowledged and accepted. “vikruti evum prakriti”, meaning diversity is human nature, as per Rig Veda, this was the hallmark of Indian culture where diverse sexualities and identities coexisted. Indian tradition identifies gender as fluid and tritiya prakriti or transgender identity and existence forms the woof and warp of Indian cultural tradition and Hinduism.

Transgender in Hindu myth and religion-

Innumerable instances of gender and sexual transformation among Gods occur in Hinduism. Bhakthi tradition holds that the soul or atman is genderless. The prime concept of siva-sakthi tradition underlies the androgyny of human nature. Godhead represented as Ardhanariswara, lays down transgender form of divine energy. No wonder, Ardhanariswara is regarded a patron saint of the transgender. The story of Mahavishnu being transformed to a celestial beauty, Mohini to entice demons and retrieve amruta is yet another instance. As the lore goes, Siva was captivated by the beauty of Mohini and the union of two lords led to the birth of Ayyappa, popularly known as Hariharaputra. In Krishna bhakthi cult, male devotees identify themselves as women or gopis who love the male god, Krishna.

Aravan, a patron god of transgenders in India was married to Krishna who took the form of mohini to bless him with connubial bliss before he sacrificed his life for the victory of

pandavas. This event is commemorated in an eighteen- day festival held at Koovagom in Tamilnadu. As per the rituals, transgenders or arvanis dress up as brides lead by long festivities ending with the ritual burial of aravan , where transwoman mourn his death as widows. Bahuchara Mata is also a mother deity of transgenders in India. As per myth, Bahuchara mata cut off her breasts to save her honour when confronted by a bandit who tried to molest her. In penance, she asked the dacoit to cut off his genitals and worship her like a woman. As per another myth, Bahuchara Mata, asked her husband who had intercourse with men and behaved like a woman to give up his masculinity .As tradition many of her worshippers practice castration and chant songs in praise of her. There are many other deities connected with transgender like goddess Renuka in Maharashtra who is worshipped as Yellamma in Karnataka .Gadaadhara is worshipped as the combination of Radha and Krishna.The twin warrior gods of Chandi and Chamunda have a transgender form.Bhagavata devi is also considered a goddess associated with crossdressing .

In Ramayana, when Rama embarked for his fourteen – year old exile, a group of his devotees followed him. On the river bank, Rama asked his followers , men and women to go back to their homes. When he arrived fourteen years later, he discovered that a band of transgender devotees had not moved from their place. Overwhelmed by their devotion, Rama conferred them power to give blessings on auspicious occasions like childbirth and marriages. It is quite a paradox that when gods who have transgender forms are worshipped and transgenders are deemed auspicious, they are still condemned by the mainstream society.

In Mahabharata Ahiravan or Aravan was ready to sacrifice his life for the victory of Pandavas,. Before death, he desired married life. Since no woman was ready to marry a man doomed to death, Krishna took the form of Mohini and married him. Aravan's sacrifice is commemorated at the festival of koovagom. Mahabharata also gives instances of divinity and dignity accorded to transgender. As per the story of Brihannala, Arjuna was transformed to a eunuch by the curse of celestial beauty, Urvashi. During the thirteenth year of his exile, he presented himself at the court of Virata as a transgender Brihannala, a dance teacher. The king was pleased by his dance and musical skills and had it tested that he was truly feminine and did not have lust for woman. After the test, in a true Indian tradition the king treated him as a divine guest. He addressed Brihannala as “she” and asked his daughter to treat her like a queen. As the story of Shikandi goes, Amba who kills herself after penne to revenge Bheeshma is reborn as Shikandini. King Drupada raises his daughter as a man and marries her off to a princess. He exchanges his sex with a Yaksha and becomes male. During the Mahabharata war he causes the death of Bheeshma , who refuses to fight a woman by being Arjuna's charioteer.

Tritiya prakriti in Vedic times-

In Vedic times , the gender of human beings were divided into three categories- pums prakriti or male nature, stri prakriti or female nature and tritiya prakriti or third gender. Tritiya prakriti referred to individuals who had both male and female nature combined in them. Third gender was often the non reproductive category and they played an integral role in the balance of human society and nature. In Vedic times there were separate terminologies to refer to people of alternate gender. Third gender citizens were accorded dignity in Vedic times . They were neither

discriminated nor persecuted. They often had their own colonies and housing quarters and were employed in all types of professions. The common misconception that eunuchs existed in Vedic times is a fallacy associated with colonial advent. Vedic system was against self mutilation and castration was not practiced in Vedic times. Castration among servants and slaves was only introduced in the medieval Northern India during Islamic rule. The Sanskrit word “napumsaka” or “sanda” does not refer to eunuchs or has a derogatory meaning but it was used to classify alternate sexualities. The Sanskrit word “napumsaka” is used to refer to a man who has no taste for woman and could thus be used to refer to a homosexual man. “Sanda” refers to third sex who combines in him qualities of male and female and thus could be considered half man and half woman. “Kliba” could refer to the non reproductive category. The word “eunuch” is of Greek origin and refers to homosexuals and castrated men. During the colonial period when India was under the yoke of British rule, homosexuals and transgenders were degraded to the level of criminal/ perverse other as per Victorian prudish standards. Hence vague and inappropriate terms like eunuch, neuter and impotent were used to refer to transgender.

Tritiya prakriti in Kama Sutra

Kama sutra, which is considered a discourse in sexual arts, belongs to the kamashastra tradition. The work deals with the fulfillment of kama or desire, which is one of the four normative spiritual goals of life. The eighth and ninth chapters of second part of Kamasutra extensively refers to tritiya prakriti. The author describes techniques by which male and female as well as third sex can perform fellatio. Many examples of gender bending could be found in this work. “Napumsaka” could refer to gay men who are of two kinds according to whether their appearance is masculine or feminine. It makes reference to gay men or napumsaka who either liked feminine appearance and were proficient in arts and entertainment. It also refers to gay men who retained male appearance and took active role in sex. It also makes reference to “svairini” or liberated woman, who lives independently with her income either with or without a female companion.

“Sanda” belongs to the third gender category, who are believed to be half male and half female and they lived openly according to their transgender identity either as male to female or female to male. “kliba” referred to a non reproductive person who was chronically intersexed or had their genitalia damaged. They were respected for their nonreproductive status and were kindly treated in Vedic times. The concept of trans woman also existed in ancient India. “pedi” in sangam literature refers to trans woman.

In Dharmashastra and Mahanirvana Tantra transgenders are not given inheritance to property but there were provisions for their being financially supported by their families. Their exclusion from property is on account of the fact that property rights are associated with the welfare of progeny, to appease ancestors, which these groups did not produce.

In ancient India transgender often worked as ministers, confidants, attendants and keepers of royal harem and enjoyed royal patronage. They were often proficient in arts and often served as performers, courtesans, barbers and masseurs. They were accepted and treated with respect and their diversity was acknowledged.

The present pathetic situation of transgender in India is undoubtedly a sad result of cruel colonial policies that were directed against the third sex. If the colonized were subjugated and othered; alternate sexualities were abhorred and condemned. They were placed under the criminal tribes of 1871 and were subjected to acute ill-treatment. Even after 70 years of Indian independence, the ghosts of colonial rule still haunt India, which is well testified in the cruel and unjust treatment meted out to hijras in Indian society. Change is the need of the hour. Indian prejudices against transgender should be removed. An awareness of the rich transgender culture and their acceptance in Indian society should be a great step in this account.

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