

PalArch's Journal of Archaeology  
of Egypt / Egyptology

**JOURNEY OF GENDER IDENTITY IN INDIA FROM MYTHOLOGY  
TO THE THIRD GENDER**

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**Akshay Tiwari , Dr. Kusum Pal , Journey Of Gender Identity In India From  
Mythology To The Third Gender , Palarch's Journal Of Archaeology Of  
Egypt/Egyptology 17(16), 20-28. ISSN 1567-214x.**

**Keywords: Transgenders in India, Mythological stories, Journey of Transgenders,  
Third gender.**

**ABSTRACT**

Every person has a right to life as per article 21 of the Indian Constitution which has a wide horizon to give us almost all the essential rights to survive but there is a community who got this basic right almost after 67 years from independence, that too when there is evidence to prove that this community was always been mentioned and respected in our culture. The right to identify your gender is a basic right. In 2014, The Supreme court of India recognizes this secluded community as "Third Gender". This journey was not a piece of cake, transgenders were criminalized in the 17<sup>th</sup> century during the colonial era, which means almost 4 to 5 generations suffered atrocities, discrimination, harassment, embarrassment, and marginalization from society. This paper deals with the mythological evidence of transgenders in our culture and their Journey from the ancient era to becoming the third gender.

**INTRODUCTION**

Gender refers to the socially created attributes of women, men, girls, and boys. This encompasses conventions, behaviours, and roles connected with being a woman, man, girl, or boy, as well as interpersonal interactions. Gender as a social construct differs from one civilization to the next and can change through time. Sex collaborates with, but it is not the same as sex, which refers to the many natural and physiological characteristics of females,

men, and intersex persons, such as chromosomes, chemicals, and conceptive organs. Gender identity and sex are associated with one another; however, they are not the same as gendered identity. Gender identity personality refers to an individual's deeply felt, inner, and unique experience of gender, which may or may not correspond to the individual's physiology or given sex upon birth.<sup>3</sup>

Harmful gender norms, particularly those associated with inflexible ideals of masculinity, can have a severe impact on boys' and men's health and well-being. Specific concepts of masculinity, for example, may encourage boys and young men to smoke, engage in sexual and other health risks, abusing drugs, and avoid seeking help or health care.

Gender disparities are hierarchical and connect with other social and economic disparities. Gender discrimination connects with various forms of prejudice such as race, socioeconomic position, disability, age, geographic location, gender identity, and sexual orientation, to name a few. This is known as intersectionality.

### **TRANSGENDERS IN INDIA**

Hijras are legally acknowledged as the third gender on the Indian subcontinent, as they are neither male nor female.<sup>4</sup> In the early literature of ancient India, there was historical evidence of acknowledgment of “third sex” or those who were not confirmed to the male or female gender. The notion of “tritiyaprakriti” or “napumsaka” was central to Hindu mythology, folklore, epics, and early Vedic and Puranic literature. The terminology “napumsaka” has been used to designate the lack of procreative potential, which was demonstrated by distinguishing between masculine and female characteristics.

For ages, transgender people have been a part of Indian society. According to the Kama Sutra, Hijras have a documented history in the Indian subcontinent dating back to ancient times. Several people live in well-defined and well-organized all-hijra communities that are overseen by a guru. These communities have been made up of people who have been rejected by or fled their family of origin for ages. For survival, many people work as sex workers.<sup>5</sup>

In India transgender are not only intersex individuals but hold an important position in Indian cultural activities because of their mythological origin stories. When Lord Brahma began creating mankind, he encountered a quandary. He couldn't picture the world having an equal balance of masculine and feminine energies. To balance the "Purush," the counterpart has to be as magnanimous, strong but mild. Lord Shiva then acquired the appearance of “Ardhanarishvara” (half man, half woman) and came in front of Brahma. Brahma discovered synergies between the sexual natural phenomena when he saw Shiva in his Ardhanarishvara form, and this led to the creation of feminine energy, or Prakriti. The Mahabharata and the Shiva Purana both mention Shiva in their Ardhanarishvara form. And we find evidence of the Ardhanarishwar statue in many of India's most famous temples. Lord Shiva's current form is a perfect mix of masculine and feminine energies. Androgyny, you see, is nothing new or Western; it has always been.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Gender and health, available at: <https://www.who.int/health-topics/gender> (Last Visited on April 12, 2021)

<sup>4</sup>Dana Jennett Bevan, “Being Transgender: What You Should Know” (ABC-CLIO, California, 2016)

<sup>5</sup>Serena Nanda, “The hijras of India: cultural and individual dimensions of an institutionalized third gender role” Vol.11(3-4) J Homosex Summer 35-54 (1985)

<sup>6</sup>Indian Mythology and How It Approached Gender Identity, available at: <https://www.shethepeople.tv/blog/indian-mythology-gender-identity-approached/> (Last Visited on April 12, 2021)

Another important story that is quite famous to uphold the importance of transgender's cultural value, is from the epic Ramayana. Lord Rama went into exile for fourteen years, according to an occurrence in Valmiki's Ramayana. Out of love and respect, many individuals in Lord Rama's realm followed him. When Lord Rama discovered this, he ordered all the men and women to come back home. On his journey home from exile, Lord Rama noticed that the Hijras had been seated in that spot for fourteen years. Lord Rama, pleased with the Hijras' dedication, blessed them and prophesied that they would bless mankind on many auspicious events such as births and marriage.<sup>7</sup> There are numerous other tales and stories in much ancient literature of India, which will be discussed in the next heading of the same paper.

## MYTHOLOGICAL STORIES AND TALES

Many gods and goddesses in Hinduism and Indian legends are portrayed as both male and female at various times and in different manifestations, or may appear with attributes of both sexes at the same time, such as Ardhanarishvara, who was created by the union of the god Shiva and his partner Parvati, and whose half right body is the full male body and a half left body is the full female body.<sup>8</sup> Ardhanarishvara means "Lord whose half is a woman." This manifestation of Shiva signifies the "totality that exists beyond duality," and it is related to communication between humans and gods, as well as between men and women.

Many examples of deities shifting gender, emerging as different genders at various eras, or uniting to produce androgynous or hermaphroditic entities may be found in Hindu epic. To enable sexual congress, gods shift sex or emerge as an Avatar of the opposing sex. Normal human beings also go through sex changes as a result of the gods' deeds, as a result of curses or blessings, or as a natural by-product of reincarnation in many mythological stories. There are countless occasions in Hindu epics when sexual encounters fulfill a non-sexual, sacred cause; in certain situations, they are same-sex encounters. Sometimes the gods condemn these relationships, while other times they bless them.<sup>9</sup>

In contrast to stories of gender and sexual variation acknowledged by traditional Hinduism, current scholars and liberal activists have emphasized LGBT themes in lesser-known texts or extrapolated them from stories previously thought to have no homoerotic undertone. Such examinations have resulted in debates concerning the genuine meaning of the ancient myths.<sup>10</sup>

Hindu mythology has exhibited characteristics of gender diversity and non-heterosexual sexuality via developed heroes and incidents. When seen in the light of current anti-homosexuality legislation founded on colonial laws, it demonstrates that it opposed sexual norms and the popularly accepted gender binary. While the reproductive relationship between man and woman has always been respected, homosexuality and LGBT themes have been chronicled in ancient literature and traditional stories, as well as in art and performing arts. Essentially, because gender is frequently viewed as a concept, an idea, or a conviction, the breadth, and scope of which can be seen in the varied personalities, each remarkable and

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<sup>7</sup>India's third gender: A journey of Hijra community from mythology to harsh reality, available at: <https://myvoice.opindia.com/2020/06/indias-third-gender-a-journey-of-hijra-community-from-mythology-to-harsh-reality/> (Last Visited on April 14, 2021)

<sup>8</sup>Randy Connor, David Hatfield-Sparks, "Cassell Encyclopedia of Queer Myth, Symbol and Spirit" (Cassell, Los Angeles, 1997)

<sup>9</sup>Ruth Vanita, Saleem Kidwai, "Same-Sex Love in India" (Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2001)

<sup>10</sup>Yudit Kornberg Greenberg (ed.), "Encyclopedia of Love in World Religions" (ABC-CLIO, California, 2007)

different.<sup>11</sup> Given tales and stories are the shreds of evidence that show that how progressive and acceptable culture we had in ancient India. Where gender and sexuality were nothing but just a choice of a person. These stories explain how gender identity and sexuality are manifested in our culture.

### **The legend of Aravan: The Lord of Transgenders**

Aravan (literally "son of a snake"), the son of Arjuna and Ulupi (a "snake" princess), was offered to Goddess Kali in the Mahabharata to ensure the Pandavas' victory at Kurukshetra. The only stipulation was that Aravan spends his last night as a married person. No lady wanted to marry Aravan since he was going to be slain after the marriage. Lord Krishna disguised himself as a lovely woman named Mohini and wedded him. This is why the Hijras of Tamil Nadu refer to themselves as Aravanis, after their forefather Aravan.<sup>12</sup> Every year, an 18-day celebration is held in Koovagam, Tamil Nadu, during which the local transwomen dress up as Aravan's wives and mourn his death.

### **Arjuna as Brihannala:**

Urvashi cursed Arjuna, saying he would lose his masculinity if he refused her approaches, claiming she was like his mother. Indra lessened the punishment to a one-year time of Arjuna's choosing.<sup>13</sup> This was advantageous for Arjuna since he remained in disguise as a dancing teacher – Brihannala – during the Pandavas' final year of exile. He trained dancing and music to King Virat's daughter and her pals. When King Virata discovered Arjuna's true identity, he proposed his daughter's hand in marriage to Arjuna. King Arjuna turned down the offer since he had been her guru and regarded her as a daughter.<sup>14</sup> We all knew Arjuna as a great warrior and unaware of his transgender form as this world was always belong to male and had a patriarchal system where males are always glorified by them.

### **Mohini: The Female Avatar of Vishnu**

Gender fluidity and variation is a reoccurring motif in Indian Hindu mythology, and it is only right that Lord Vishnu, the Preserver of the Creation, would have a role in it. He frequently transitioned into his sole female avatar, Mohini, to rescue the world, and two examples are well-known. According to legend, Vishnu first adopted the guise of the enchantress to divert the asuras or demons' attention away from Amrita, the elixir of life. However, Lord Shiva subsequently becomes aroused to this feminine form of Vishnu, and their marriage gives birth to Lord Ayappa. Although puritans largely reject it, many scholars and authors believe it is a not-so-subtle hint to gender fluidity and bisexuality, as Lord Shiva is reputed to have the capability of knowing everything.<sup>15</sup>

### **Shikhandi: The Game Changer of Mahabharata**

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<sup>11</sup>Storytelling: LGBT themes in Hindu mythology, available at: <https://indianexpress.com/article/parenting/blog/storytelling-lgbt-themes-in-hindu-mythology-5273332/> (Last Visited on April 18, 2021)

<sup>12</sup>B. N. Raveesh, "Ardhanareeshwara concept: Brain and psychiatry" Vol.55(2) Indian J Psychiatry 263 (2013)

<sup>13</sup>Bharti Kalra, Manash P Baruah, et. Al., "The Mahabharata and reproductive endocrinology" vol. 20(3) Indian J Endocrinol Metab 404-407 (2016)

<sup>14</sup>Shiva Prakash Srinivasan, Sruti Chandrasekaran, "Transsexualism in Hindu Mythology" vol.24(3) Indian J Endocrinol Metab 235–236 (2020)

<sup>15</sup>LGBT Representation in Hindu Mythology, available at: <https://blog.justcling.com/2018/11/06/lgbt-representation-in-hindu-mythology/> (Last Visited on April 18, 2021)

In the Mahabharata, Princess Amba committed herself after being kidnapped by Bhishma for his stepbrother and rejected in marriage by him. She vowed to exact retribution on Bhishma. Amba was resurrected as King Drupada and given the name Shikhandini. According to legend, she practiced penance and changed her gender to become Shikhandi. Bhishma identified him as Shikhandini, Amba reincarnated, during the battle of Kurukshetra, and he refused to fight a "woman." Bhishma was obliged to down his swords on the ninth day of the fight while Shikhandi arrived in Arjuna's chariot. Arjuna concealed behind Shikhandi and used his arrows to strike Bhishma. Thus, Shikhandi had a role in Bhishma's death at Kurukshetra and the Pandavas' triumph.<sup>16</sup>

As important as Shikhandi was to the war, her story is often overlooked in retellings of the Mahabharata because her sex is often looked down upon in society. Shikhandi, on the other hand, was as human as anyone else in the war, and her gender had no bearing on what she accomplished. Shikhandi represents all queer people, including gays, lesbians, Hijras, transgender people, hermaphrodites, and bisexuals. However, Shikhandi's contribution to the war's outcome between the 9th and 10th days demonstrates that, as a character, Shikhandi was neither here nor there. She was neither a man nor a woman, but she was the one who brought the Kauravas down. Shikhandi's sex was rarely an issue in her relationships, even though some people looked down on her. Everyone liked her, and she went on to win the war for the Kauravas. This goes on to show that whether you are a man, a woman, or somewhere in between, your karma is what will propel you forward in life.

Shikhandi symbolizes the third gender, even though it may have taken time for Indian generations to realize the significance of the LGBTQ community and to understand that our religious texts were quite progressive. At the end of this story, Shikhandi was a human being who was crucially significant in the victory of Satya. He was and always remain a crucial character in the Mahabharata.

### **Chitrangada: Who Transformed Her Gender to Marry Arjun**

The story of Arjuna, the Pandava prince, and Chitrangada is not told in the Mahabharata. The story is told in Rabindranath Tagore's drama Chitra, in which Tagore portrays Chitrangada as a warrior clad in masculine attire. Arjuna is infatuated with her because of her integrity and bravery. The gods grant Chitrangada's father a girl instead of a boy. He raises this girl as a man, a warrior, and during a hunt, she catches the gorgeous Arjun, who has been exiled from his kingdom for twelve years. She is infatuated with him but is afraid that Arjun would reject her since she is masculine (In fact, he thinks she's a male because she's such a skilled combatant). As a result, Chitrangada requests Madan, the god of love, to make her more feminine. She confronts Arjun in this manner, and Arjun is infatuated with her. When Manipur is invaded, the people cry out for the warrior-princess, and Arjun gets to know about her for the very first time. He strives to meet this woman, whom he considers being special. Chitrangada, who is greatly delighted, asks Madan to return her to her former shape, and Arjun falls even more in love with her. As a result, Arjun adores Chitrangada for who she is, not what she pretends to be. The story of Chitrangada is the best example to understand gender fluidity.

### **Ila: Story of a Bigender**

Ila appears in one of Hindu mythology's few examples of female to male metamorphosis. Ila's origins are shrouded in a slew of stories. She was born to Vivasvata Manu and his wife

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<sup>16</sup>Supra Note 18 at 8

Shraddha, who desired a son. They worshipped, and the gods transformed Ila into Sudyumma. Sudyumma then enters a jungle and is cursed to become a woman, but the curse is lessened by Shiva, who permits him to be a male every alternate month. During his feminine phase, Ila/Sudyumma married Buddha (Mercury) and was believed to have given birth to the Pururavas (the Lunar dynasty).<sup>17</sup> He eventually became a man by Shiva's blessing. Buddha is also characterized as transsexual in another variation of the same story.<sup>18</sup>

### **Ayyappa: Who was born out of the union of Shiva and Vishnu**

Lord Ayyappa was Vishnu and Shiva's son. Lord Ayyappa is a well-known Hindu god who is mostly worshipped in South India. Ayyappa is another name for him. The Puranas describe the birth of God Ayyappa. Vishnu, in the form of Mohini, is impregnated by Shiva and gives birth to Ayyappa, whom she shamefully surrenders. Ayyappa is said to have sprung from Shiva's sperm, which he ejaculated after embracing Mohini, rather than Mohini being pregnant.<sup>19</sup> Yet, many experts contend that a child cannot be borne by two men and only males and females may bear children, though in this particular situation Vishnu was not in his real form. The notable point in this story is this, that Mohini was a form of Vishnu and Vishnu is a man so technically Mohini is a transwoman who gave birth to Ayyappa with the union of Lord Shiva. Puranas mentioned it confidently without condescending Shiva or Mohini or Ayyappa, which indicated that transformation from man to woman or woman to man was nothing wrong and even considered as a choice.

### **VANGUARDS OF THE JOURNEY**

For decades, transgender persons have battled societal prejudice. They are labelled, denied chances, and alienated from society. Many are labelled as "impure," which only indicates our lack of concern for the community. Instead of honouring these individuals, society looks down on them. Nonetheless, they have risen despite all of the prejudices and hurdles that the societal structure imposes on their development, and have earned a name for themselves in a variety of fields. These people not only did spectacular works but also helped their whole community to fight to achieve equal rights and justice as any other human being. They were respected in ancient India and lost their position in the colonial era but in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, they fight back and now got recognition as the third gender in the year 2014. This journey was not easy, some people worked hard to achieve this success. These vanguards and their contribution is given briefly below.

Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, a girl who was trapped in a male body became a demigod when she realized her gender identity and started embracing herself with pride and confidence. Laxmi Narayan Tripathi is an activist working for transgenders' rights, trained dancer, and television personality in India. She is the flagbearer of the LBGTQ community rights in India from last more than two decades. Amidst India's HIV/AIDS epidemic in the 1990s, Tripathi was among the first activist to advocate for the inclusion of hijras as a different section in the national anti-AIDS program. She engaged in HIV/AIDS activism at numerous international venues, including the 2006 World AIDS Conference in Toronto, Canada. She was the first transgender person to represent the Asia Pacific at the United Nations in 2008, when she talked about the condition of sexual minorities worldwide, notably in India. The Indian Supreme Court determined in 2014 to legally acknowledge the third gender, owing to

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<sup>17</sup>Supra Note 12 at 6

<sup>18</sup>Devdutt Pattanaik, "Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata" (Penguin India, New Delhi,2010)

<sup>19</sup>Devdutt Pattanaik, "The Man Who Was a Woman and Other Queer Tales of Hindu" (Routledge, London,2002)

Tripathi's successful plea. The ground-breaking ruling set the path for transgender individuals to access government benefits and for same-sex relationships to be decriminalized in India in 2018. Following her Supreme Court triumph, Tripathi founded the non-profit Astitva Trust, Asia's first transgender organization, as well as the Kinnar Akhara, a Hindu hijra religious order.

Gauri Sawant is another transwoman who changed the world for her community through her significant activism. In the year 2000, Gauri established the Sakhi Char Chowghi Trust. The NGO encourages safe sex and offers transgender people counseling.<sup>20</sup> She was the first transgender person to petition the Supreme Court of India for transgender adoption rights in 2014.<sup>21</sup> She was indeed a petitioner in the NALSA case, in which the Supreme Court declared transgender people to be the third gender.<sup>22</sup>

Ranjita Sinha has spent the last decade working for LGBT rights and is now a well-known figure in Bengal's social circles. She presently heads a community-based organization called 'Bandhan,' which strives to raise HIV awareness, sensitize people about the disease, and collaborate with diverse stakeholders to foster acceptance. She was recently named as a major member of the newly constituted Transgender Development Board by the state government.<sup>23</sup>

A. Revathi, a transgender activist, was the first hijra to write on hijra concerns and gender politics in Tamil. Her publications have been published in over eight languages, and they serve as a fundamental resource on gender studies in Asia. Her book is part of a larger research initiative involving over 100 universities. She is the writer of *Unarvum Uruvamum* ("Feelings of the Entire Body"), the first book in English written by a hijra.

The journey of transgenders' rights is still going on and Joyita Mondal, who became the first judge in Lok –Adalat proved that trans people are worthy of every right as any other human being from a binary gender system.

There are several other transgenders and other people who facilitated the process of recognition as the third gender, even the fight is not over yet. The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) 2019 is not enough in many ways and is criticized by various people and organizations working for the development of the trans community. Devdutt Pattanaik, Ruth Vanita, and Saleem Kidwai are the writers who helped a lot and even still trying hard to make people understand that how sexuality and gender identity are manifested in our culture.

## **JUDICIAL TAKE TO RECOGNIZE TRANSGENDERS AS THE THIRD GENDER**

NALSA vs. Union of India<sup>24</sup> is the case that changed the whole scenario of the transgender's rights movement in India by giving them recognition as the third gender. There is a manifestation of various stories from mythologies to the present time which showed us, how

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<sup>20</sup>Against All Odds: Activist Gauri Sawant Has Been Fighting for Transgender Rights All Her Life, available at: <https://thelogicalindian.com/my-social-responsibility/gauri-sawant-transgender-activist/> (Last Visited on April 22, 2021)

<sup>21</sup>How two mothers came to embrace and accept LGBTQI, available at: <https://indianexpress.com/article/lifestyle/life-style/gauri-sawant-mothers-day-lgbtq-4650587/> (Last Visited on April 22, 2021)

<sup>22</sup>Gauri Sawant- How I became a Mother, available at: <https://mumbaimirror.indiatimes.com/mumbai/other/gauri-sawant-how-i-became-a-mother/articleshow/57995471.cms> (Last Visited on April 22, 2021)

<sup>23</sup>From Begging to Stardom, Kolkata's Transgender Community Has Come a Long Way, available at: <https://www.news18.com/news/india/from-begging-to-stardom-kolkatas-transgender-community-has-come-a-long-way-1605015.html> (Last Visited on April 22, 2021)

<sup>24</sup>National Legal Service Authority vs Union of India & Ors (AIR 2014 SC 1863)

hijras were always a part of our culture but their basic right to recognize and identify their gender was given too late to them which is ironic.

Starting lines of the said judgment showed us that how the judiciary understood the pain and suffering of the transgender community. As per Radhakrishnan, J., our culture seldom recognizes or cares to recognize the anguish, suffering, and grief that members of the Transgender community experience, nor does it respect the innate sentiments of members of the Transgender community, particularly those whose mind and body reject their biological sex.

The court formed a committee to conduct an in-depth investigation of the challenges confronting the transgender community and to recommend actions that the government might do to alleviate those concerns. Court declared that Apart from binary gender, Hijras and Eunuchs should be considered as “third gender” for the sake of protecting their rights under Part III of our Constitution and the legislation passed by the Parliament and the State Legislature. The freedom of transgender people to choose their self-identified gender is likewise protected, and the Centre and state governments are directed to offer legal recognition of their gender identity as male, female, or third gender.

Supreme Court of India also directed the government to provide health services, job opportunities, and other facilities to secure social and economic justice to the transgender community.

## **CONCLUSION**

The journey of the transgender's rights movement from 300 BC to the 21<sup>st</sup> century was full of hurdles. This neglected community faced atrocities, discrimination, humiliation, and whatnot. Even after the supreme court's decision in the year 2014, the government is not able to provide them the security and support they deserve. We as a system or society owe them a lot.

Gender as a spectrum may seem like a contemporary discovery to some, yet Hindu literature and mythology have taught for ages about heroes who broke the binary gender system. While the reproductive bond between man and woman has long been valued in the religion, Hinduism, unlike most Western religions, has long seen homosexuality as a natural activity, which is chronicled in the folk story and sacred scripture alike. There are uncounted stories in Indian mythology regarding gender identity, gender expression, gender fluidity, and sexuality.

Many similar examples may be found in our epics. If we look back, we can see how these personalities can upset patriarchal notions. Before the British colonized us, India and its culture were considerably more tolerant. Let us all pledge to restore our culture, the culture that represents our true attitude. Let us restore our fire from the past, and make this world a nicer place to live in.

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