Cultural Representation of Transgenders in Indian Mythology

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Abstract:

Many cultures and mythologies worldwide since ages have mentioned and discussed the existence of androgyny in addition and equivalence to the existence of male and female genders. Androgyny refers to the existence of both male and female characteristics as well as anatomy in the same body or person. An androgynous body is a definite kind of body that contains both female and male organs and hence cannot be classified as either male or female and is considered intersex and ambiguous. They are also called hermaphrodites, a term taken from the Myth of Hermaphroditus from Ovid's Metamorphosis. As said by Himadri Roy, "In fact, the idea of the androgynous body and mind has captured the human imagination across cultures, and over the centuries. Androgyny has been represented in ancient times through mythology, art, and religion." (271) Cultural representation of androgyny and androgynous body can be seen in different ancient myths. Across the world, since ancient times, there has been a fascination towards the concept of Gods and humans who can extend across the sexual binary of male and female. Ancient myths and religions depict the same enthrallment. Myths have this unique capability to present figures that do not match the concept of reality and stereotypes of sexuality and gender. The present paper provides an overview of the representation of transgenders in Indian Mythology.

Key Words: Androgyny, Myth, Transgender, Indian Mythology

Introduction:

Greek Myth of Aristophanes by Plato in *Symposium* celebrates gendered bodies and sexualities other than male, female, and heterosexuality. However, the myth explains more about homosexual love which is considered queer by the normative heterosexual society. This myth is also popularly known as the myth of the missing half and as Plato's Other Half theory. "The

Symposium brings together various speeches by orators and thinkers of the time, as conceived and narrated by Plato." (Roy 272) According to Plato, Philosopher Aristophanes delivers his speech in the form of a creation myth. According to the Greeks, Zeus is the king of the Greek Gods and is the creator of humankind. Aristophanes claims that in the beginning three genders or sexes were created by Zeus. All humans were created completely round with four legs, four arms, and two faces looking in opposite directions and had two sets of genitals. Humans with two sets of male genitals were said to be sprung from the sun, those with two sets of female genitals were said to be descended from the earth, and the third set of humans, sharing both male and female genitals were said to be descended from the moon. Because of their double strength, the humans became proud and unruly and turned out to be a threat to the heavens over time, causing concern to the Gods. Some Gods proposed to eliminate the human race, but Zeus came up with a plan not wanting to destroy the humans but instead to weaken them. He formulated splitting each human body into two to reduce their strength under which they turned impudent. Thus, humans with two male genitals became two male sexes, and those with two female organs gave rise to the female sex, and humans with both male and female physical attributes turned into one male body and one female body. Apollo then rearranges the face and genitals to the front of the body so that when the divided halves meet it enables the reproduction in male and female. "According to Plato's conceptualization of Eros, or Love, each split person continues to experience a sense of incompleteness and searches for his or her lost in desire to join with the missing other and become complete again." (Roy 272) Therefore as Plato conceptualizes when the divided halves of the androgynous body desire their opposite it leads to heterosexual love and results in reproduction, whereas the men divided from the same male body and women divided from the female body desire the missing half of the same sex with no aim of reproduction resulting in homosexual love. Thus, Plato presents culturally adequate expositions of both homosexuality and heterosexuality through the concept of androgyny.

Another myth expounding the origin of the physically androgynous body can be found in the 7th-century AD Latin work *Metamorphosis* by Ovid. It is the myth of Hermaphroditus, from whose name the term hermaphrodite is derived, and who is considered the God of hermaphrodites and effeminate men. Hermaphroditus is said to be partly male and partly female. However, he was not born so and is the son of Hermes and Aphrodite, the gods of male and female sexuality respectively. According to Encyclopedia Britannica "A legend of the

Hellenistic period made Hermaphroditus a beautiful youth, the son of Hermes and Aphrodite.'' He was born very handsome and when he was around fifteen, he went into the woods wandering and swimming in the spring. There the beautiful young Naiad nymph, Salmacis feels attracted to Hermaphroditus and falls in love with him. When tried to be seduced by Salmacis, Hermaphroditus spurns her advances and tries to escape. Undismayed, Salmacis goes into the pond in which Hermaphroditus was swimming and embracing him tightly prays gods to unite her with him forever. Gods granted her wish by uniting their two bodies into one and thus Hermaphroditus became androgynous and enfeebled. The spring is thus said to have acquired the special power of turning men who bathe in it into effeminate.

Thus, it is evident that in ancient Greek and Roman culture, androgynous bodies as well as alternative sexual identities and desires were culturally accepted. Not only in ancient Greece and Rome but in India also ancient mythology represents androgyny as a powerful force and the origin of human beings. In Hindu mythology according to Alka Pande, the two schools of thought – Shaivism and Vaishnavism, each holds a story of an androgynous body. Shaiva's school of thought claims that Shiva's manifestation as *ardhanariswara* or 'half-woman god' is the beginning of androgynous body. Shiva is said to be a man on the right half and a woman on the left half who is the goddess Parvati or Shakthi. Ardhanarishvara is claimed to be the divine concept that led to the origin of human beings. Hinduism believes that the human race was created by Lord Brahma. In the beginning, Brahma failed in creating human beings who were capable of procreating. Brahma lacked the power to create women. While pondering over the problem, Shiva appeared before him as ardhanariswara, and seeing this form Brahma realized that Shiva had the potential to become a couple that can procreate. He then prayed to Shiva in penance to separate his female form. Pleased by Brahma's austerities, Shiva separated his female goddess feature and created the goddess Sati from his left side of the body. Thus, on seeing Sati, the female goddess, Brahma procured the feminine energy that enabled him to create women. Thus, a human line was created by Brahma, with the creation of men and women, who couple and procreate.

Vaishnava school of thought, on the other hand, claims Lord Vishnu as the source of an androgynous body. The myth is that of Mohini, the only female avatar i.e., female incarnation of Lord Vishnu. Lord Vishnu is prominent for his unbound incarnations i.e., avatars that have significant importance in various Hindu epics and stories. Mohini is the most unusual

avatar which is seductive and beautiful. In Mahabharata, the Samudra Manthana legend offers the origin of Mohini. When there was a war between gods and demons for the nectar of immortality – 'Amrit', Vishnu who was in support of the gods offered a plan of diplomacy. The gods then allied with demons to jointly churn the ocean for the nectar of immortality. The churning of the ocean of milk was no easy task. Mount Mandara, a mountain was used as a churning rod and Vasuki, a snake who lives on Shiva's neck, was used as a churning rope. Vishnu then turned into a turtle, the 'Kurma Avtar' to support the mountain from sinking in the ocean. When the churning started a lot of things came before the nectar of immortality appeared and an arrangement was made that each good and object that came out of churning should be alternatively shared. When Amrit came finally out of the ocean it was the demons' turn to have it. However, Vishnu planned to deprive the demons of having the nectar of eternal life, and hence when a fight spurted between gods and demons for nectar, he took the form of Mohini, the most beautiful and enchanting damsel. Vishnu as Mohini seduced demons with her charming beauty distracted them from Amrit and distributed it among gods. Several ancient texts and Puranas of Hindu mythology mention the Samudra Manthana Legend.

There is another most prominent and famous tale about Mohini – her union with Shiva. The legend says that when Vishnu turned into Mohini, her beauty had a spell on Shiva. Shiva along with his wife Parvati visited Vishnu requesting him to show Mohini. Once Vishnu turned into Mohini, Shiva fell head over heels for her beauty and overcome by lust tried to couple her in front of his wife Parvati. It is said that because of this amorous love, there was a violent coupling resulting in the birth of 'Ayyappa" or Shri Manikantha - the son of Vishnu and Shiva. Many see it as the beginning of the homosexual relationship as both Vishnu and Shiva are males, except for the fact that Vishnu is in the avatar of a female. However, many spiritual preachers deny this argument. Shri Datta Swami, a spiritual preacher, in his blog entitled *Lord Shiva married Lord Vishnu (Mohini)??!!* writes an excerpt of his message. In this blog, he right away refutes the argument of ascribing homosexuality to Shiva and Vishnu.

This argument projected is meaningless showing the climax of stupid ignorance. Shri Manikantha is not born to Lord Shiva and Lord Vishnu. He is born to Lord Shiva and Goddess Mohini, who is the female incarnation of Lord Vishnu. Even in the case of human beings, a female in the present birth, married to a male and delivered a son, might have been a male in the previous birth. Since she was male in previous birth, her sexual relationship with her

husband in the present birth is not the homosexual relationship and also this does not mean that a male delivered a son! (Shri Datta)   https://www.speakingtree.in/blog/lord-shiva-married-vishnulord--mohini

Thus, Mohini can be seen not only as the source of androgyny as said by Alka Pande, but she can also be seen as the source and origin of transgenders as she is a male who turned into a female. Though androgyny can be understood in different ways, transgenders for sure are one way to understand the concept. Across the world, across ages, there were and are many androgynous or transsexual people who are considered transgenders and are very much part and parcel of the socio-cultural milieu of the societies. The third gender i.e., transgenders of India can be considered as androgynous. It's not that all transgenders are born as hermaphrodites but that they also are included under the umbrella term of transgenders.

Mythology of Transgenders in India

Hijras the transgenders of India who are being referred to as the third gender by the government have been historically regarded as close to Gods in Indian Mythology. Transgenders have been part of Indian society for centuries. In the earlier writings of ancient India, historical evidence of recognition of "third – sex" or persons not confirming to either male or female genders does exist and the concept of "tritiyaprakriti" or "napumsaka" had been an integral part of the Hindu mythology, folklore, epic and early Vedic, and Puranic literatures. "The term "napumsaka" had been used to denote the absence of procreative ability, presented by signifying difference from masculine and female markers." (Michelraj 17) Ancient Hindu literary texts celebrate the fluid nature of sexuality and gender.

Likewise, early Indian mythology texts dealt with the issues of gender fluidity and sexuality. The great Indian Myths *the Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* also mention the existence of transgenders and they give much prominence to transgenders in contrary to the way they are treated in contemporary Indian society. "In the Ramayana, too, there are tirunangais. They wait for Rama on his return from Vana vasa." (Vidya 81) Revathi shares the myth from Ramayana as told to her by her Nani. As the myth says, when Rama was about to leave for his exile for fourteen years in the forest, lot of his subjects and devotees came to see him off. They all walked along with him until the edge of the forest and were about to accompany him further into the forest, at which point, Rama told them to stop. Rama then instructed all men, women, and children to get back to their houses and that he'd complete his

fourteen years of exile and would come back to rule them. However, all men, women, and children left except for a group of people who remained at the rim of the forest for fourteen years until Rama returned. When returned Rama was astonished to see them waiting for him and asked why they had not gone back to their homes in the city, to which they replied, "Swami! We belong neither to mankind nor to womankind. You said then that men, women, and children ought to return to the city. But you did not ask us to go. Bound by your wishes, we remained here." (Revathi 45) Amazed and moved by their sincerity, Rama granted them a boon that whatever they speak will be true and that their words will come true. It is one of the reasons why many people in India fear their curses and hence offer them money. It has led later to their profession of collecting money at weddings and newborns by conferring blessings which are known as "badaai". "Thus, the traditional Hindu society found a place for the third gender in its cultural narrative as ritual performers validated by the mythical sanction of their role as the giver of blessing in marriage and childbirth." (Sen 269)

Similarly, in *The Mahabharata* Arjuna takes the disguise of Brihannala in the Virata Parva in which Pandavas had to lead their thirteenth year of exile as agyatavas i.e., remaining incognito. Pandavas thus assumes disguises and spend their year of agyatavas in the Matsya Kingdom of King Virata. As part of being incognito Arjuna takes the disguise of a eunuch dance master named Brihannala and teaches dance and singing to Uttara, the princess of the kingdom of Virata. Another myth from *The Mahabharata* also suggests that Arjuna had to take the guise of a eunuch, as he had a curse from Urvashi, the celestial apsara, to be a eunuch for twelve months. After entering the kingdom of Virata, Arjuna as Brihannala was treated with respect due to a queen, irrespective of his gender identity as transgender. This episode not only exemplifies the existence of the third gender in Puranas but also epitomizes the gender tolerance that needs to be observed in the contemporary gender-rigid society.

Another important event in the *Mahabharata* related to transgenders is about Aravan, son of Arjuna and a Naga princess Ulupi, and is considered a minor character in the *Mahabharata,* where he was portrayed as a legendary hero who sacrifices his life to the goddess Kali for the victory of Pandavas in the eighteen-day Kurukshetra war. As the myth says, to ensure their victory in the great war of Kurukshetra, Pandavas must sacrifice a young man who should be perfect in every way. When the question of a perfect young man arose it was only three who were considered perfect – Krishna, Arjuna, and Aravan. Since Krishna and Arjuna

have prominent parts to be played in the war, Aravan accepts to be the sacrifice. However, he asks for three boons before his sacrifice. The first one is that Aravan asks Krishna to grant him a heroic death at the hands of a great hero on the battlefield. The second boon he asks for is to witness the entire eighteen-day war. The third boon, which is said to be found only in the folk rituals, is that Aravan wants to get married before his sacrifice. "Aravan agreed to be their sacrificial lamb as long as his final wish was granted." (Vidya 81) However, some assume that he wanted to marry for a fleetingly conjugal bliss, whereas others claim that Aravan wanted entitlement to the right of cremation and funerary offerings as bachelors were buried and not cremated. Whatever the reason may be Aravan wished to get married before he offered himself as a sacrifice.

Since no woman would come forward to marry Aravan, Krishna assumes the form of a woman, Mohini, and marries Aravan. After a day of conjugal happiness, Aravan enters the sacrificial space. After he is sacrificed, his wife Mohini (Krishna) laments his death and assumes the grab of a widow. (Revathi 260)

Transgenders of India consider Aravan as their patron. According to mythology, they are considered to be from Aravan's lineage. Revathi shares the rituals of the Koothandavar temple festival in Koovagam of Villupuram district in Tamil Nadu, which is held every year on a full moon day from mid-April to mid-May. Aravan is known as Koothandavar in that region of Tamil Nadu. Thousands of transgenders from all over India and from other neighboring countries visit Koovagam for this festival. The festival is observed for eighteen days and the main festival falls on the full moon day. The first sixteen days before the main event are spent in celebrations, songs, dances, beauty contests, oratorical contests, plays, and awareness seminars on HIV/AIDS by different NGOs. Transgenders on the seventeenth day marry Aravan, i.e. priests of the temple tie thalis or mangalsutras around the necks of the transgenders and thus they become the brides of Aravan for one night. The next day i.e. on the eighteenth day of the festival Aravan/Koothandavar is taken as a procession to be sacrificed to Kali and transgenders play the role of a widow and mourn the death of Aravan through ritualistic dances, by breaking their bangles and ripping off their thalis. They wear white saree or dress as they mourn the death of Aravan. Thus, transgenders play the part of Mohini, the female form of male Krishna, and the ancient myth is re-enacted. Hence, it can be said that

Villupuram's Koovagam Koothandavar festival is a celebration of transgender identity of India.

One more character from the *Mahabharata* that celebrates gender transgression is Shikhandi. She was a female born who transgenders into a male. According to C. Rajagopalachari's *Mahabharata* Shikhandi in her previous life was one of the three sisters – Amba, while the others were Ambika and Ambalika, the daughters of the king of Kasi, whom Bhishma selects as brides for his younger brother Vichitravirya. However, Amba mentally chooses Salva, the king of Saubala as her husband and refuses to marry Vichitravirya. But Bhishma defeats Salva and takes three sisters to Hastinapura and arranges the wedding. Amba rejects the wedding saying that Bhishma brought her by force though she has chosen Salva as her husband and asks Bhishma to do the right thing to which Bhishma sends her back to Salva. But Salva rejects her and heartbroken Amba returns to Hastinapura and informs the same to Bhishma. Bhishma then tries to get her married to Vichitravariya, but he too rejects her and desperate Amba asks Bhishma to marry her. However, Bhishma who took the vow of celibacy instantly refuses her hand in marriage and after a few years, she goes back to Salva only to get rejected again. Amba considers Bhishma as the cause of her blighted life and is engulfed in revenge. But all her attempts to avenge Bhishma were futile as no Prince or king dared to fight him. Dejected, she takes hard austerities to get the grace of Lord Subramanya who gives her a garland of ever fresh lotus and says that whoever wears it will become the enemy of Bhishma. Even then no one dares to take the lotus garland and she hangs it on the palace gates of King Drupada who refuses to grant her prayers. Consumed by grief and rage and kept alive with the passion for revenge, Amba makes a penance in the Himalayas to get the grace of Shiva who then grants her a boon that she would slay Bhishma in her next life.

In her later life, Amba was born as a daughter to King Drupada and was named Shikandini. As a young girl, Shikandini wore the lotus garland that was hung on the palace gates and remained there untouched by everyone because of their fear of Bhishma. Seeing her adorned with the lotus garland, Drupada was dismayed at her audacity and feared that it would draw the wrath of Bhishma. So, he sends his daughter into exile in the forest. It was in that forest she practices austerities and in time transforms into a male and thus becomes the warrior Shikandi. It was with Shikandhi as his charioteer that Arjuna attacked and killed Bhishma in

the war of Kurukshetra. Thus, it can be said that the undefeatable great warrior of Kshatriyas was defeated only with the help of a transgender.

Thus, the two great Indian epics The *Ramayana* and The *Mahabharata* nobly depict transgenders on par with the other two genders. In addition to these epics, there are tales in regional folklore that refer to both deities and heroes and to non-divine figures, who change genders or manifest as avatars of the opposite sex or as third gender. Laxmi in her autobiography shares such legends of the goddess Bahucharamatha who was worshipped by hijras of India as their deity. "The goddess that all hijras worship is Bahuchara Mata or Murgiwali Devi. She rides a cock and hence the name Murgiwali Devi." (Tripathi 177) The cock is said to be the symbolic of innocence. As one of the myths says, Bahuchara was the daughter of Charan Bapal and Detha. Once while traveling with her sisters in a caravan, she along with her sisters was accosted by a bandit named Bapiya. It was a custom amongst Charan men and women not to surrender to an enemy but to kill themselves when faced with enemies so that they would not be overpowered or killed by their enemies. Hence, when accosted by the marauder Bapiya, Bahuchara along with her sisters announced 'Tragu' – a form of self–immolation, and all the sisters cut off their breasts. The legend also says that shedding the blood of a Charan was considered abominable and a heinous sin. After performing Tragu, Bahuchara cursed Bapiya to be impotent for the rest of his life as he was indirectly responsible for the spilling of Charan blood. When repented he was told that he would be relieved from his curse unless he worshiped Bahuchara Mata dressing and acting like a woman for the rest of his life.

According to another myth, a king prays to the goddess Bahuchara Mata, for the boon of a son. But he was blessed with an impotent son. The impotent prince Jetho once dreamt of Bahuchara Mata ordering him to cut off his genitals, wear women's clothes and to devote his life as her servant. The legend says that the goddess also identifies other impotent men in the region and orders them to chop their genitals off as well. She declares that the punishment for violating these orders would be seven lives of impotency. Another legend has it that the goddess Bahuchara Mata was once a princess who was married to a prince from another dynasty. However, the prince was effeminate, and her marriage was never consummated as her husband would never come to the bridal bed but would run into the forest where he behaves like a woman. This went on for a long time and finally one night the princess followed her husband to the jungle and witnessed his antics. Furious, she appeared as Bahuchara Mata

castrated her husband and cursed him. She also announced that all men like him ought to be emasculated to give them a chance at a better rebirth. She also promised protection to the same community of men who were castrated and worshiped her.

If observed, Bahuchara Mata has consistently, over these myths, appeared as a figure who identified impotent men and commanded them to get castrated and wear women's clothes and to serve her. It is said that, as she declared that those who refuse to assume the attire and mannerisms of the opposite gender would be cursed for the next seven incarnations to be born impotent, the cult of devotees who serve and worship Bahuchara Mata grew. And thus, the goddess has become the central religious figure amongst hijras in India. All the transgenders who undergo castration, i.e. nirvana are asked to chant the name of Bahuchara Mata as it is believed that the goddess would save them through the hazardous procedure of castration. Bahuchara Mata temple located in Bechraji town in Meshana district of Gujarat is said to be constructed in 1783 AD. The temple is also famous for its stone carvings and decorations. The origin of Bahuchara Mata is said to be situated at Varakhdiwala temple in Bechraji. Being the patron saint of hijras, Bahuchara Mata is also known as the goddess of fertility. Childless couples and parents of handicapped newborns come to make offerings and pray to the goddess. It is said that every year about 1.5 million pilgrims visit this temple. However, many hijra homes are said to have small shrines dedicated to Bahuchara Mata.

Conclusion:

The cultural representation of transgender individuals in Indian mythology is a testament to the rich diversity and acceptance that once existed within ancient Indian society. The presence of transgender characters such as Ardhanarishvara, Shikhandi, and others demonstrates a historical acceptance and acknowledgment of gender fluidity beyond the binary concepts prevalent in many modern societies. These mythological narratives depict transgender individuals with respect, and dignity, and often as divine beings, challenging societal norms and offering a more inclusive understanding of gender. Their stories serve as a reminder of the fluidity and complexity of gender identities that have been an intrinsic part of Indian culture for centuries. However, despite these positive representations in mythology, contemporary Indian society still grapples with societal prejudices and discrimination against transgender individuals. There's a pressing need for broader acceptance, legal recognition, and inclusion of

transgender people in various spheres of life, echoing the inclusive ethos reflected in ancient Indian mythology.

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