

Sex and Gender Identity Phenomenon- World Vs Indian View

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Abstract: Different cultures, religions and literatures around the world describe existence of two sexes of human being since time immemorial. In Christianity, the holy book Bible (The Old Testament) mentions of 'Adam' as the first man and 'Eve' as the first woman of mankind. In India, Vedas (Rig Veda, 4000-3000 BC) of Hindus also mention of two different sexes of human being as 'Purusha' (male) and 'Prakriti' (female), but also recognizes existence of another sex state- 'Tritiya Prakriti' or 'Third gender'. Sanskrit language that originated in India (~4000 BC) mentions about existence of four gender states- Pung (masculine); Stree (feminine); Kliba (Neuter) and Ubhayalinga (common gender). English language also recognizes four different gender states as masculine, feminine, neuter and common. In India, since the time of epic Ramayana (written 400-200 BC) and Mahabharata (3100 BC but written 400-100 BC), presence of other gender or sex states other than 'male' and 'female' were recognized and were portrayed in different characters of the two epics. This article tries to review how Indian culture and Hindu religion looked into the whole issue, its transition to its modern time and how it differed from other cultures around the globe in relation to the origin of the recognition and concept of the issue of the sex and gender identity deviations since time immemorial.

Key words: mythology, transgender, hijra, homosexuality.

I. Introduction

The term 'Sex' refers to the physiological attributes that identify a person as male or female. These physiological attributes include type of genital organ (penis, testicles, vagina etc), type of predominant hormone circulating in the body (oestrogen, testosterone) etc. The term 'Sex' is also used to describe physical acts of sex at times and may include penetrative sexual acts, kissing etc. The term 'Sexuality' is often used interchangeably with 'Sex' or 'sexual intercourse'. However a comprehensive view of Sexuality includes social roles, personality, gender and sexual identity, biology, sexual behaviour, relationship, thought and feeling. The expression of sexuality is influenced by social, ethical, economic, spiritual, cultural and moral concerns. Thus 'Gender role' or 'identity' is a social and psychological construct within the umbrella term of Sexuality.^[1] 'Sexual identity' means about the identity people adapt for themselves, based upon whether they are attracted to people of the same gender, a different gender or to more than one gender, so classified as homosexual, heterosexual or bisexual respectively. 'Sexual behaviour', on the other hand, refers to sexual activities individuals engage in and may vary from their sexual identity. For ex, some males may have sex with men (behaviour) but yet do not think or identify themselves as homosexual (identity).^[1] Thus 'Sex' (whether a person has male or female genitalia), 'Gender' or 'Gender identity' (whether a person thinks of oneself as a man, woman, both or a different gender) and 'Sexual identity' (being heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual etc) refer to different aspects of a person. There are often prescribed rules for appropriate sexual and gender identities and sexual behaviour in different cultures and communities around the world. Deviations from this norm may often result in discrimination, stigmatization, abuse and ridicule. Different terminologies exist around the globe in different cultures and communities to denote different sexual and gender identities since the beginning of human civilization. In Indian society too, these are witnessed and were recognized since ancient times as evident from some characters with sex or gender identity problems mentioned in the epics- Ramayana and Mahabharata. The different terms used to denote such sex or gender identity problems are many—Gay, Lesbian, homosexual, heterosexual, Hijra, intersex, transsexual, Kothi, Queer, Transvestite etc. These terms are constantly being discussed and examined nowadays and therefore their meanings and how they are used to denote identities change over time.^[1]

II. Indian Mythology

Individuals with gender and sex identity problem experience a lasting mismatch or incongruity between sex (biologically defined) and gender (psychologically defined). The presence of this kind of sex and gender identity disturbances in Indian context is evident from its mention in different Hindu epics, religion and cultures.

About the Hindu God 'Shiva', there is mention of one such form which merges with *Parvati* and together they are known as *Ardhnareshvara*, a god that is half *Shiva* and half *Parvati*.^[2]

According to some versions of the *Ramayana*, when Lord *Rama* was leaving *Ayodhya* for his exile, a crowd of his subjects had followed him into the forest. Noticing this crowd of devotees, *Rama* requested them not to mourn for him, and told that all the "men and women" of the crowd should return to their places in *Ayodhya*. When *Rama* returned back to *Ayodhya* after 14 years, he found that the *hijras*, being "neither men nor women", had not moved from the place where he had addressed them. Impressed with their devotion, *Rama* granted *hijras* the boon to confer blessings on people during auspicious occasions like childbirth and weddings. This boon is the origin of *badhai* in which *hijras* sing, dance, and give blessings.^[3]

Brihannala was the name assumed by the great warrior *Arjuna* in the Hindu epic *Mahabharata*. According to the epic, once *Arjuna* was invited to the palace of *Indra* (the rain God and *Arjuna's* father). *Urvashi*, one of the heavenly maidens at *Indra's* palace was strongly attracted to *Arjuna*. *Indra*, noticing that his son was also spell-bound by *Urvashi's* beauty, offered *Urvashi* to *Arjuna*. Having received *Indra's* instructions, *Urvashi* reached *Arjuna's* room one night. But *Arjuna* did not have any intentions of making love to *Urvashi* and instead regarded her as his "mother", because once *Urvashi* was wife of the king *Pururavas* (*Arjuna's* ancestor). *Urvashi* felt insulted, and she cursed *Arjuna* that he would remain as a eunuch for the rest of his life. Later on *Indra's* request, *Urvashi* curtailed the curse to a period of one year, which would be in the thirteenth year of the *Pandava's* exile (*aggyatavasa*). During that one year of exile *Arjuna* spent his life as a eunuch, *Brihannala*, at king *Virata's* Matsya kingdom and taught singing and dancing to the princess, *Uttara*.^[4] The Aravani Festival is an eighteen-day event in southern India that commemorates the one-day marriage of *Aravan*, a hero selected for human sacrifice, and *Mohini*, a beautiful female incarnation of the Lord *Krishna*. The largest Aravani festival is held every year in the town of Koovagam, near Chennai in the state of Tamil Nadu, India in the month of April-May at the Koothandavar Temple. Each year the festival draws a large number of devotees known as *Aravanis* or *Alis* or *hijras*. They collectively take on the role of *Mohini*, symbolically marrying *Aravan* and then going into a state of mourning and widowhood the next day. According to *Mahabharata*, the *Pandavas* must sacrifice one of their fighters to win the Goddess *Kali's* favor in an upcoming battle with their *Kaurava* cousins. *Aravan*, son of the great hero *Arjuna* and *Ulupi* was chosen to die. *Aravan* made a request of getting married the day before being sacrificed. However, no woman would want to marry only to become a widow a day later. So lord *Krishna* turned into a beautiful enchantress *Mohini*, spending that final night with *Aravan* as his wife and lover.

In some variations of the myth, *Aravan* was also a eunuch. The festival in Koovagam is also a site for LGBT activists to support the hijra community.^[5]

There are also few stories about a Hindu goddess, *Bahuchara Mata*, all associated with transgender behaviour. In one of the many folk stories associated with *Bahuchara Mata*, the goddess was once a princess who castrated her husband as a punishment because he preferred going to the forest and "behaving as a woman" instead of coming to her bridal bed. In another story, a man who attempted to molest *Bahuchara Mata* was cursed with impotence. He was forgiven only after he gave up his masculinity, dressed as a woman, and worshipped the goddess. Another story depicts that once she and her sisters were on a journey with a caravan when a marauder named *Bapiya* attacked their caravan. To save themselves from being sexually molested *Bahuchara* and her sisters cut their breasts. *Bapiya* was cursed for his act and he became impotent. The curse was lifted only when he worshiped *Bahuchara Mata* by dressing and acting like a woman. One important myth concerns a king who prayed before *Bahuchara Mata* to be blessed with a son. The goddess complied but the prince, who was born to the king, was impotent. One night *Bahuchara* appeared to the prince in a dream and ordered him to cut off his genitals, wear women's clothes and become her servant. It is said that *Bahuchara Mata* identified impotent men and commanded them to do the same. If they refused, she punished them by cursing that during their next seven incarnations they would be born as impotent. This is how the cult of *Bahuchara Mata*, whose devotees are required to self-castrate and remain celibate, developed. The primary temple to this goddess is located in Gujarat and it is a place of pilgrimage for *hijras*, who see *Bahuchara mata* as their patroness.^[2]

The ancient *Kama-Sutra* mentions the performance of fellatio by feminine people of third sex (*tritiya prakriti*).^[6]

III. Islamic Mythology

While transgender issues have not been explicitly addressed by most major Islamic institutions, there is information concerning cross-dressing, those transgressing traditional gender roles and sex-reassignment surgery. There is evidence that Indian *hijras* identifying themselves as Muslim by religion do not practice Islam differently from other Muslims and they are no less than a true Muslim. In Islam, the term "*Mukhannathun*" is used to describe "men who resemble women" or the "transgender women" and are poorly distinguished from

eunuchs. Neither this term nor the equivalent for "eunuch" occurs in the Quran, but the term does appear in the Hadith, the sayings of Muhammad, which have a secondary status to the central text.^[7, 8]

IV. Greek Mythology

According to Greek mythology, the patron god of intersex and transgender people is Dionysus, a god gestated in the thigh of his father Zeus, after his mother died from being overwhelmed by Zeus's true form. Other Goddesses and Gods considered sometimes as patrons of homosexual love are the love goddess Aphrodite and the Gods Eros, Himeros and Pothos.^[9, 10, 11]

V. Chinese Mythology

Chinese mythology has been described as "rich in stories about homosexuality. Tu Er Shen is a deity in Chinese folklore who manages the love and sex between homosexual men. His name literally means "rabbit deity". According to "The Tale of the Rabbit God" in the *Zi Bu Yu*, Tu Er Shen was originally a man called Hu Tianbao, who fell in love with a handsome young imperial inspector of the Fujian Province. One day Hu Tianbao was caught peeping on the inspector, at which point he confessed his reluctant affections for the other man. The imperial inspector had Hu Tianbao sentenced to death by beating. Since his crime was one of love, other officials decided to right the injustice by delegating Hu Tianbao as the god and safe guarder of homosexual affections. In order to cater to the needs of modern homosexuals, worship of the Rabbit God has been resuscitated in Taiwan and a temple was founded in Yonghe City by a gay, Taoist priest.^[12, 13]

VI. Japanese Mythology

According to Japanese mythology, homosexuality was introduced into the world by 'Shinu No Hafuri' and his lover 'Ama No Hafuri'. They were servants of the sun goddess Amaterasu. Upon the death of Shinu, Ama committed suicide out of grief, and the couple were buried together in the same grave. According to some versions of the story, the sun did not shine on the burial place until the lovers were buried separately.^[14, 15]

VII. Other Mythologies

The Sumerian creation myth (Mesopotamian mythology), "The Creation of Man", from circa 2000 BC, lists a number of physically differing people created by the goddess Ninmah. These included "the woman who cannot give birth" and "the one who has no male organ or female organ", which have been regarded as being third gender or androgynous. Enki, the supreme god, however accepts these people and assigns them roles in society as "naditu" (priestesses) and "girsequ" (servants to the king).^[16]

In the Babylonian mythology, the gender of the "kurggaru" and "assinnu" priests was supernaturally changed by the goddess Ishtar, making them feminine. The changes may also facilitate possession by the goddess, causing a psychological change or prompting physical castration.^[17]

An important Mayan deity of central America, best known from the Classical period (200-900 AD), the so-called Tonsured Maize God, is often depicted in Maya art as an effeminate young man associated with art and dance, and is thought to have constituted a 'third gender'.^[18]

Modern Era Of Gay Identity And Homosexuality Movement

The term 'men who have sex with men' (MSM) covers all the groups and subgroups of men or biological males who have sex with other men/biological males. The HIV/AIDS programmers, concerned by the 'gay identity politics' in the western world in the late 20th century, developed the term 'MSM'. In many African and Asian countries the term homosexual is not understood and doesn't have an equivalent in native languages except in socially derisive terms. 'Homosexual' is a medical term invented in 1869 by Austrian clinical psychologist Karoly Maria Kertbeny to define a person who has sex with a partner of their own sex. As the behaviour was to be targeted by HIV/AIDS prevention strategies, the term MSM excluded identity politics and reduced discrimination against the individuals who practiced this socially stigmatized behaviour.^[20]

Also, the emergence of 'gay culture' in western societies during the 20th century encouraged the belief that people are either 'gay' (homosexual) or 'straight' (heterosexual). This 'binary' sexual worldview is not understood in India where subgroups exist such as *hijras* described as *tritika laingik* (third sex). Some of the Buddhist and Jain chronicles of ancient India describe numerous male non-heteronormative genders such as *napunsaka*, *kliba*, *pandaka* and *ardhanareeshvara*. Though gay, bisexual and straight may be standard terms understood in modern identity sexual politics, they are not practical to describe life in India where men have sex with other men but don't allow such behaviours to determine either their social or sexual identity.^[20]

Sigmund Freud, Magnus Hirschfield and other European doctors were one of the first to understand the human sexual behavior and this reflected in their writings which were sympathetic towards the concept of homosexuality. Hirschfield founded Berlin's Institute for Sexual Science, Europe's best library archive of materials on gay cultural history but the library was destroyed by Nazis on May 10, 1933.^[21]

In the United States, greater awareness, along with the efforts of Senator Joseph McCarthy during the early 1950s, led to the first ever demands for fair treatment in mental health, public policy, and employment. The earliest organizations concerned with the rights of homosexuals were the Mattachine Society, founded in 1950 by Harry Hay, Chuck Rowland and the lesbian support network, "Daughters of Bilitis", in 1955 by Phyllis Lyon and Del Martin. In 1956, Dr. Evelyn Hooker's ground breaking paper, demonstrated that gay men were as well adjusted as heterosexual men, often more so. But it would not be until 1973 that the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality as an "illness" classification in its diagnostic manuals. Throughout the 1950s and 60s, gay men and lesbians continued to be at risk for psychiatric lockup and jail and for losing jobs or child custody when courts and clinics defined gay love as sick, criminal, or immoral.^[21]

In 1965, new laws prohibiting racial discrimination were laid on. The turning point for gay liberation came on June 28, 1969, when patrons of the popular Stonewall Inn in New York's Greenwich Village fought back against ongoing police raids of their neighborhood bar. Stonewall is still considered a watershed moment of gay pride and has been commemorated since the 1970s with "pride marches" held every June across the United States.

The gay liberation movement of the 1970s saw myriad political organizations spring up. Frustrated with the male leadership of most gay liberation groups, lesbians formed their own collectives, festivals, newspapers and publishing houses. Political action exploded through the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, the Human Rights Campaign, the election of openly gay and lesbian representatives like Elaine Noble and Barney Frank, and, in 1979, the first march on Washington for gay rights.^[21]

Through the 1980s, as the gay male community was decimated by the AIDS epidemic, demands for compassion and medical funding led to renewed coalitions between men and women as well as angry street theatre by groups like AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) and Queer Nation. A different wing of the political rights movement called for an end to military expulsion of gay and lesbian soldiers. Finally, in the last decade of the 20th century, celebrity performers, both gay and heterosexual, have been among the most vocal activists, calling for tolerance and equal rights. As a result of hard work by countless organizations and individuals, helped by Internet and direct-mail campaign networking, the 21st century heralded new legal gains for gay and lesbian couples. Same-sex civil unions were recognized under Vermont law in 2000, and Massachusetts became the first state to perform same-sex marriages in 2003. With the end of state sodomy laws (Lawrence v. Texas, 2003), gay Americans were finally free from criminal classification. Gay marriage is now legal in the Netherlands, Belgium, Spain, and Canada, although the recognition of gay marriage by church and state continues to divide opinion worldwide.^[21]

Different Gender Identities In Modern India

The hijras: In India, *hijras* are transgendered/ or transsexual persons, who are part of Indian ethno-cultural class called '*hijra gharanas*'. Transgendered males are those who cross-dress and are involved with gender self-allocation. In short, such males wish they could become biological females. *Hijras* or eunuchs, also known as *Kinnars* or *aravanis* or *alis* or *bhand* are traditionally a sexual minority community in India living for hundreds of years. They are biologically males but they reject their 'masculine' identity and accept self-identity as women. The term *hijra* is more commonly advocated by social workers but transgender community members identify themselves as '*khwaaja sira*'. Individually, these transgender/transsexual people are known as *khusras*; a cross-dresser as *zenanis* and an eunuch as *nirwaans/ nirvans*. In India, such men/males form highly visible communities called *hijra gharanas* led by a guru. The ritual categories within the *hijra gharanas* are *akwa* and *nirwaan*. *Akwa* are men preparing for castration after rites between the guru and student (*chela*). The *nirwaan/nirvana hijras* are ritually castrated men who then become a part of ritual 'houses' called *nirvana gharanas*. *Nirvana* group is also known as '*khada-kothis*'. This group is at highest risk for HIV/AIDS as they can have only receptive anal sex, if they wish to. These *hijra* communities have sustained themselves over generations by 'adopting' young boys who are rejected by, or flee their family of origin, mostly due to societal pressures.^[19, 20]

Castrated *hijras* who continue to wear male attire are termed as '*khada-kothis*'. Another type of *hijras* is the male temple prostitutes, who are also known as *jogta* or *jogappas*; and are mostly male children dedicated to a goddess. They (*jogtas*) ritually cross-dress for religious purposes. The *hijra* construct in India, better known in classical circles as '*tritika laingik*', has four clear subcategories hidden underneath the umbrella term of transgendered persons/ cross dressers. Most transgendered persons (*hijras*) are not castrated. The four clear subcategories of *hijras* are- transvestites, transsexual, hermaphrodites and drag queens or *satla kothis*.

1. **Transvestites:** This subcategory comprises biological males who cross-dress as a fetish. Their orientation is mostly heterosexual in that they prefer to have sex with women.
2. **Trans-sexual:** This subcategory comprises biological males who cross-dress because they feel they are females. This 'gender-self-allocation' can be so powerful that they will go for castration and reconstructive

surgery to become women. The sexual orientation of such persons is again heterosexual, as they would like to have sex with males as biological females.

3. **Hermaphrodites:** Such humans may have primary sexual characteristics of both females and males, such as testes and vagina or a combination thereof. The sexual orientation of such persons is not known.
4. **Drag queens/ Satla kothis:** this subcategory of *hijras* may be actually self-identified homosexuals who become effeminate or put on effeminate mannerisms so as to attract males for receptive or insertive sex.^[20]

Kothis: This group in Indian society are one group of recognizable MSM ('men who have sex with men') community. They exhibit visible feminine mannerisms, but they may or may not adopt feminine clothing. They are generally receptive partner in sex. When they behave as insertive partner with other male, then they are known as *dhoru-kothis* in north India. These sexual identities are not inflexible, however, *kothi* identified MSM tend not to engage in sex with one another. *Kothis* generally come from lower socio-economic background. Some of them engage in survival based sex work. They often present very differently from middle-class, educated, gay identified MSM. Many *kothi* men also engage in sex with women and may get married to a woman. The word '*kothi*' or '*koti*' is common across India, similar to the *kathoe*y of Thailand. Unlike other *hijras* they don't live in communities and often distinguished from *hijras*. *Kothis* are also known as *chakkas/khusras* in Punjabi and *kojja* in Telugu.^[19, 20]

Panthis: *Panthis* is the term used by *kothi* men to refer to their sexual partners. They are also known as *gowriya* or *giriya* or *gadiya* or *parikh*. They are the active partner who 'penetrates' during the act of sex (anal). They may or may not appear to be more tough and masculine. However, these *panthis* also at times may behave like passive-receptive partner.^[19, 20] MSMs who engage in both insertive and receptive anal sex are sometimes labelled within the community as 'double-deckers' or '*dupli-kothi*' or '*do-paratha*'.

Legal Status Of Transgenders In India

The government of India has recognized *hijras* as a "third sex" in 1994 thus, granting them the basic civil rights of every citizen. In India, *hijras* now have the option to identify themselves as a eunuch ("E") on passports and on certain government documents. However, they are not fully accommodated yet in different areas like in election. A citizen must identify as either male or female to vote.

In April 2014, Justice KS Radhakrishnan declared transgenders to be the third gender in Indian law. Justice Radhakrishnan said that transgender people should be treated consistently with other minorities under the law, enabling them to access jobs, healthcare and education. He framed the issue as one of human rights, saying that, "These TGs, even though insignificant in numbers, are still human beings and therefore they have every right to enjoy their human rights", and concluded by declaring that:

- (1) *Hijras*, Eunuchs, apart from binary gender, be treated as "third gender" for the purpose of safeguarding their rights under Part III of our Constitution and the laws made by the Parliament and the State Legislature for that.
- (2) Transgender persons' right to decide their self-identified gender is also upheld and the Centre and State Governments are directed to grant legal recognition of their gender identity such as male, female or as third gender.^[23]

In 2009 a decision was passed on by Delhi high court decriminalizing homosexuality (Section 377 IPC). However in 2014, the Supreme Court of India again reinstated the original law.

VIII. Conclusion:

While originally ascribed a cultural role in Indian society, *hijras* today tend to be stigmatized because of their non-normal appearance of 'man dressed as woman'. They are looked down upon because of their presumed occupation, namely sex work. Indian mores have changed drastically from the time when *hijras* were referred to as '*tritika laingika*' or the third sex and had a respectful position in the society to the present status of them, when they face much stigma and discrimination in Indian society. This stigma gets reflected in the attitude of common people towards them as fear, shame, disgust, intolerance and discrimination.

Disclaimer: The information regarding the mythological stories in this article is subject to variations as different sources have different versions of the same story. Some facts about these stories have no concrete evidence and reference and may be somewhat fictional.

Glossary

Aggyatavasa: The thirteenth year of 14 years of exile faced by the Pandavas in which they supposedly had to live without being identified, otherwise they would face another 14 year exile.

Arjuna: One of the greatest warrior and archer described in the epic Mahabharata of Hindu mythology. He was one of the five brothers collectively known as Pandavas.

Ayodhya: An ancient kingdom which now is situated in Uttar Pradesh state, India. It's the birthplace of Lord Rama and it was ruled by him and his ancestors.

Badhai: A ritual followed in India in which hijras bless newborns and newlyweds. It's considered auspicious and reportedly brings good luck in life.

Hijras: Name used in India and Pakistan for people belonging to 'third gender'. There are many synonymous terms also used.

Indra: The God considered being the king of all Gods. He is considered the God of rain.

Kali: A Hindu Goddess, whose name is derived from her dark complexion. She represents the powerful aspect of females.

Kama-Sutra: An ancient Indian Sanskrit text widely considered to be the standard work on human sexual behaviours written by sage Vatsyanana.

Kaurava: The descendants of king Kuru and who were 100 in numbers. They are mainly associated with cheating, immorality.

Krishna: The 8th incarnation of God Vishnu who helped Pandavas winning the war.

Kurukshetra: A place currently in Haryana, India where the 18 day-long war of Mahabharata was fought.

Mahabharata: The Sanskrit epic describing the greatest war of ancient India fought between Kauravas and Pandavas. The war lasted for 18 days in which Pandavas came out to be victorious.

Pandavas: The five brothers who fought and won the war of Mahabharata. They were called so because they were the sons of King Pandu.

Parvati: The Hindu Goddess who is wife of God Shiva and is associated with power.

Rama: Lord Rama was the 7th incarnation of God Vishnu. He was king of Ayodhya kingdom and is remembered for sacrifice, honesty, obedience towards parents and love for wife.

Ramayana: One of the ancient Sanskrit epic of Hindu mythology which describes the life of Lord Rama.

Shiva: One of the principal deities in Hinduism along with Brahma and Vishnu. The God of destruction and transformation.

Ulupi: one of the wives of Arjuna.

Urvashi: She is considered the most beautiful nymph (apsara) who danced and entertained the Gods in the court of Indra.

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