

Mythically Queer: Reclaiming Gender Fluidity in Indian Mythology through Five Select Narratives

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Abstract

Queerness, understood as a broad spectrum of gender and sexual expression is often viewed as a taboo. British Invasion and colonialism led to view homosexuality and gender fluidity as a stigma. But several Ancient mythologies and classical texts across civilizations recognized and, in some cases, consecrated people whose gender and sexuality did not fit into rigid binaries. Through a detailed study of mythological characters such as Ardhanarishvara, Shikhandi, Krishna and the birth of Bhagirath, the paper explores how they embody a range of gendered behaviours, transitioning effortlessly between male and female forms and embracing homosexuality. By analysing these narratives, the paper argues that pre-colonial Indian mythologies provide a powerful structure for understanding gender as a fluid, cross-disciplinary and acknowledged conception, thereby providing a rich cultural heritage for the new-fangled queer and trans communities in India. Moving beyond rigid binaries, the present paper aims to provide a counter-narrative to colonial frameworks and pathologization that have suppressed the primordial understandings of gender and sexuality.

Keywords: gender fluidity, pathologization, colonial frameworks, embracing homosexuality

Across the diversified Indian mythologies, people never felt disdained due to their sexuality. Through tales of mythological heroes like Shiva, Vishnu, Krishna and many others, it is observed that they changed their gender effortlessly and were not treated with prejudice for doing this. Their identities were placed somewhere outside the existing norms and binaries. Examples of this can be seen in great Indian epics like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Known as the hijra community, they played major roles in royal courts and temples in India. This was disrupted when the British subjugated India to imperial rule, and colonized not only the country but also the thoughts and perceptions of the people. British laws during the Victorian period criminalized homosexual relationships and pathologized their communities. The present paper aims at how and why reclaiming history plays a major role in reforming the currently existing prejudices and ameliorating the lives of the queer.

The advent of British colonial rule had adverse effects on India's view on gender fluidity and sexuality. The Britishers wanted to modernise India by imposing Victorian morals and Puritan ideals. Their legal frameworks criminalized and suppressed gender nonconformity and homosexuality. This is stated to be the Britishers' "Civilising Mission" of India which was evidently led by a 'Puritan Victorian mind' with deep seated ideologies of indigenous understanding of gender and sexuality. India was reckoned as a place of where sexual vice of all sorts took place. India's diverse expression of sexuality and gender was considered as immoral and iniquitous. The imposition of British values rendered India's multifaceted gender identities abnormal and erased the intricacies of pre-colonial India.

Further, the British colonial agenda regulated the lives on Indian people, especially those of women. They addressed women as 'prostitutes' who lived outside of monogamous Hindu marriage and appointed spies to monitor women's sexual lives stating that secrecy is proof of sexual transgression and controlled their mobility. The colonisers also punished transvestism – cross dressers, specifically targeting the Hijra community.

In 1861 the British imposed Section 377, which made "carnal intercourse against the order of nature" a crime in the Penal Code of colonial India. This vague law was used predominantly to harass queer and trans people with very little recourse; it allowed for severe discrimination and violence. The law emerged from a 19th-century Victorian morality and Christian ideas about sexuality and sexuality in a society that previously accepted a wider spectrum of sexualities and practices.

Another harmful colonial law was the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, which nominally targeted the Hijra community. Under this law, there were strict surveillance powers over the community and bans on their traditional cultural practices, which included cross-dressing and publicly performing. They had further movement restrictions under the similar sorts of measures, which further pushed the community to the margins of society, decimating cultural practices that had once received respect.

The British viewed India's heterogeneity of sexualities and gender identities as a sign of "Oriental vice" and weakness that needed to be controlled and 'civilized', through extensive laws and punishments. This phrase is explicitly used in the academic article "British Policies towards Homosexuals and the Hijras in Colonial India: An Assessment" published in the Athena journal. The article states: "The projection of homosexuality as 'Oriental Vice' by the colonial authority was just the explanation of Indian 'effeminacy'". Additionally, the phrase is cited in scholarly work compiled by R.K. Dasgupta, referencing Ballhatchet (1980), as part of the argument that colonial policy framed queer sexuality as a 'special oriental vice'. Such colonial reckonings pathologized (made into illness) non-normative sexualities and trans and non-binary identities, and worked to erase those identities from existence and to restrict them from being publicly available.

Pre-colonial India's own richness and dynamism of gender and sexual identities as evident in its religious life, culture, and society. Gender roles were not locked within tight binaries and same-sex relations as well as non-normative gendered expressions were accepted without shame. Sanskrit as well as other ancient languages have vocabulary like 'Tritiya prakriti' (third nature), 'Napunsaka' (neither male nor female), and others showing the acceptance of gender variety. The embracing of wide-ranging sexualities and gendered expressions was not limited to classical literature but was also colourfully present in the artistic and cultural environment of ancient India.

Besides, cultural performances like Theyyam, an ancient folk ritual combining theatre mime and worship that predates Hinduism but incorporates Hindu Mythology and Kathakali, the classical dance-drama of Kerala, embedded cross-dressing as a transformative subversion of gender roles. In Theyyam, gods and spirits were commonly depicted in cross-gendered roles, erasing the distinctions between male and female. In Kathakali, male performers enacted female roles, reflecting their beauty and poise.

This gender-bending in religious and cultural performances further cements the notion that varied gender expressions were not merely recognized but also possessed a significant importance. This fluidity and acceptance were not only bounded to cultural performances, but was also found in ancient lores of our culture. The following section traverses the five selected narratives in which mythical characters portray gender fluidity and sexual diversity. The first story is the story of "Bhagirath, who was born of two women", the champion who brought the holy Ganga River onto Earth. This story was produced approximately in the 14th century in Bengal. It began when King Sagara's bloodline was cursed and the only way to relieve it would be bringing River Ganga on Earth. Despite every effort by every king born into the dynasty, Ganga was very adamant about staying in the heavens. To make things worse, one of Sagara's descendants, King Dilipa, died without an heir. The whole kingdom of Ayodhya was in chaos without anybody to take over the throne. Brahma and Purandara became worried about the happenings in Ayodhya and decided to consult Shiva about it. Shiva visited their palace and met Dilip's two widows. Shiva blessed them with a son. He blessed them with a boon where they could conceive a child without a man. The two women took their time to build close friendship, and they copulated after a certain period of time. Ten months later, one of them gave birth to a son. Since he was born by the union of two *bhagas* (female organs), he was given the name Bhagiratha. He was born disfigured without a bone structure. Brahma took pity on him and included bones in his body. Finally, he became the warrior who brought river Ganges into planet Earth.

The next tale is titled “Shiva, who included the female in his male body” – the consecrated form of Shiva and Shakthi, popularly called as ‘Ardhanadhishwara’. It all started when Bhrigu, a Saptarishi, started to become intensely devout about Shiva. So, everyday he visits Lord Shiva and circumambulates him (pradakshina) thrice before starting his day. Ironically, he overlooks Parvati though she is seated right beside him. Parvati is annoyed. She sits close to Shiva one day; and Bhrigu turned into a rat and started going around Shiva. The Lord, being very surprised by this, carefully positions Parvati on his lap, just to see what he would do. Bhrigu then transformed into a small bird and continued his routine. Shiva is both pleased and a bit annoyed – pleased due to Bhrigu’s devotion and annoyed due to his action of ignoring Parvati. She feels fired up about this discrimination. Lord Shiva and Parvati then merged into one – Shiva becomes half Parvati and vice versa. This form was called Ardhanari, meaning half-man and half-woman. They turned into one being where both the masculine and feminine proportions were equal. Bhrigu revolves Shiva’s right leg as a bee. Shiva then achieved the yogic Siddhasana posture, where Bhrigu had no way to circumambulate Shiva alone. In the end, he was made to revolve them both. Thus, Ardhanadhisvara is being worshipped as the symbol of unity of male and female across the Hindu culture. The principles of yoga were formulated based on this; that one should never miss either their masculine or their feminine side.

The following story, is about the legendary warrior Shikhandi who caused the death of Bhishma, the military commander of the ancient Kuru Kingdom in the Mahabharata. In Shikhandi’s previous life as Amba, Bhishma ruined her marriage and life that nobody was ready to marry her. She then ran away to the forest and performed austerities for revenge. Shiva then blessed her saying that she will play a major role in Bhishma’s death in her next life. She immediately kills herself and was reborn as King Drupada’s daughter. Growing up into a beautiful maiden, she remembered every part of her past life as a part of Shiva’s boon. She was banished by her father from the kingdom, and went into the forest. She performed severe penance on herself. One day, a Yaksha named Stunakarna was curious about why she lives in the forest reprimanding herself. After learning the reason, he agreed to help her by giving her his manhood and exchange his sex with her, since it would be easier to kill Bhishma. On the tenth day of the battle, Shikhandi went into the battlefield as a man along with Arjuna and confronted Bhishma. Bhishma, tied by his morals, said he wouldn’t fight anyone born as a woman. Shikhandi and Arjuna shot arrows at Bhishma and this led to his fall. Shikhandi finally avenged the death of Amba.

Historically, in many instances, Krishna is seen wearing women’s clothes, mainly during his Raas Leela, also known as Krishna Thandava, including nose rings, earrings and even long plaits. He is one among mythical figures who is comfortable wearing woman’s clothes. In the story “Krishna, who wore women’s clothes in love”, Krishna stole the village women’s clothes while they were bathing. As a punishment, they decided to dress Krishna as a Gopi. To their surprise, Krishna enjoyed being dressed up and even danced with them. In another story, Krishna and Radha exchanged each other’s clothes for a day. The mood Krishna evokes using his feminine side is the act of love and affection, and also breaks the rigidity of opinions of the present society.

The final tale, “Ram, who included all in his kingdom”, is about Ram, the seventh avatar of Lord Vishnu and the protagonist of the epic Ramayana. In this story, Ram, the king of Ayodhya is seen accepting people of all genders in his kingdom. When Kaykeyi ordered Ram to be exiled into the forest for fourteen years, the citizens of his kingdom followed him till the river that separated the forest and the city of Ayodhya. He referred to them as the ‘men and women of Ayodhya’, and asked them to return to their homes. Fourteen years later, when Ram, Lakshman and Sita returned after fourteen years, they found some people, still waiting there. When questioned as to why, they said, “Fourteen years ago you told the men to return to Ayodhya and you told the women to return to Ayodhya. But we are neither men nor women. We were given no instruction. We did not know what to do. So we waited here for you.” (Pattanaik, 173). Ram was moved to tears and he felt really bad about what he did. He hugged them and welcomed all saying that they too are his citizens and finally they entered the kingdom together. This story can be seen as a metaphor for acceptance, moving beyond traditional social structures of today.

Though the decriminalization of Section 377 in 2018 is a landmark legal reform, the journey of complete acceptance for homonormativity and gender diversity in India is still incomplete. The social attitudes

remain ambivalent, and the discrimination and prejudice still continue. The colonial ideology regarding non-binary gender identities and sexual fluidity as 'unnatural' and 'immoral' has been well ingrained in the collective psyche of Indian society. The decolonial imperative regarding non-binary lives and sexual fluidity in India emphasizes the reversal of colonial laws and moralities that obscured sexual diversity and gender fluidity. Resistance is about fighting against Victorian norms of heteronormativity and cultural stigmatisation born of colonial ideals. Reclamation refers to India's precolonial past, where fluid identities were found in mythical characters such as Ardhanarishvara, Shikhandi, and the Hijra community. By reclaiming these histories and the primordial understandings of gender and sexuality, there is a possibility that India might progress towards a free and inclusive future, no longer limited by colonial ideas of only two genders.

Ancient Indian myths are bound with fluidity, diversity and inclusive representations of gender and sexuality. Pre-colonial systems bestowed respect to those who subverted binaries, rather than the pathologization and repression brought by the colonial order. Through going back and reclaiming these ancient and indigenous perceptions, current Indian society can pay respect to its own tradition and strive for a more inclusive future—one in which queerness and gender variance are reaffirmed as aspects of cultural heritage.

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