

Transsexualism in Hindu Mythology

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Abstract

In spite of India showing progress in various medical, economic and social fronts, the care of the transgender individual is still encumbered by the various biases and taboos that people hold. But, this was not true in the antiquity. Hindu mythology holds transgender individuals in a status equal to other genders. This brief review of the various references of transgender individuals in Hindu mythology throws light on the various ways the topic of transsexualism and changing gender was addressed.

Keywords: Hindu, mythology, transgender, Transsexualism

In the 21st century in India, people continue to have various beliefs in the mythology that we are steeped in. This is evident even in the clinical practice where family members in an urban metropolis who might support a change of their child's gender might still come up with questions related to whether the medical practitioners have any knowledge of transgendered individuals from the ancient Indian Epics. A brief review for the astute clinician would enable answer a few questions in this regard going forward.

Sanskrit is one of the oldest languages in the world and is known to use three genders: Masculine, feminine, and gender-neutral. The concept of "tritiyaprakriti" or "napumsaka" had been an integral part of the Hindu mythology, folklore, epic and early Vedic and Puranic literatures.

TRANSGENDER IN THE PURANAS

The first reference of transgender is the female avatar of Vishnu—*Mohini*. Literally translated, Mohini means an enchantress. The Mahabharata describes the first appearance of Mohini when the *devas* and *asuras* had churned the ocean with the assistance of Vishnu as the *Kurma* (tortoise) avatar to acquire *Amrita* (the elixir of immortality). Using her charm, she had to separate the fight between *devas* and *asuras* and provide the Amrita to the *devas*.

Mohini makes a reappearance in the *Vishnu purana* when she used guile to save Shiva who had just given a boon to Bhasmasura that would incinerate anyone whose head he touches. The origins

of Shankara – Narayanan (Hariharan) in the *LingaPurana* is attributed to the merging of Shiva and Mohini (Vishnu). This story is also associated with the procreation of Shiva and Vishnu resulting in the creation of Ayyappa (who is also referred to as *Hariharaputra* – son of Shiva and Vishnu).

TRANSGENDER IN RAMAYANA

In the Ramayana, Lord Rama was banished from the kingdom and he was asked to spend 14 years in the forest. His followers followed him to the forest but he requested all the "men and women" to return back to the city of Ayodhya. The transgendered individuals (*hijras*) stayed back with Lord Rama. Lord Rama was greatly moved by their love and loyalty and sanctioned them the power to confer blessing on auspicious occasions like marriage, child birth, and inaugural functions.

ARAVAN, THE PROGENITOR

In Mahabharata, Aravan (in Tamil literally the son of a snake), the son of Arjuna and Ulupi (a "snake" princess) was offered to be killed for Goddess Kali to ensure the victory of Pandavas in Kurukshetra war. The only condition was that Aravan should

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spend the last night of his life as a married man. No woman was willing and came forward to marry Aravan as he was going to be killed after the marriage. Lord Krishna took the form of beautiful woman called Mohini and married him. This is the reason why the Hijras of Tamil Nadu call themselves Aravanis named after Aravan their progenitor.^[1] In Koovagam, Tamil Nadu, there is an 18-day festival every year, where the village trans-women dress up as his wives and then mourn for Aravan's death.

ARJUNA – BRIHANNALA

Arjuna got cursed by Urvashi that he would lose his masculinity when he rejected her advances stating that she was like his mother. The curse was reduced by Indra to a period of 1 year of Arjuna's choice.^[2] This turned out to be a boon for Arjuna because he stayed in disguise as a dance teacher – Brihannala during the last 1 year of exile for the Pandavas. He taught dance and music to the daughter of King Virat and her friends. King Virata when came to know the real identity of Arjuna, he offered his daughter's hand to Arjuna to marry her. King Arjuna rejected this offer as he had been a teacher to her and considered her a daughter.

ILA

Ila features in one of the rare cases of female to male transformation in Hindu mythology. There are a number of origin myths surrounding Ila. She was born to Vivasvata Manu and his wife Shraddha who wished for a male offspring. They prayed and the gods changed Ila to a man called Sudyumma. The story goes on to Sudyumma going into a forest where he is cursed to become a female but, the curse is mitigated by Shiva who allows him to be a male every alternate month. During his female phase, Ila/Sudyumma consummated her marriage with Budha (Mercury) and was supposed to give birth to the Pururavas (the Lunar dynasty). He attained his manhood in the end owing to a boon by Shiva.

SHIKANDINI TO SHIKANDI

In Mahabharata, after being abducted by Bhishma for his step brother and rejected by him in marriage, Princess Amba took her life and swore to take her revenge from Bhishma. Amba was reborn to King Drupada and named Shikhandini. As the story went, she performed austerities and changed her sex to become Shikhandi.^[2] In the battle of Kurukshetra, Bhishma recognized him as Shikandini, Amba reborn, and he did not

want to fight with a "woman". On the tenth day of the war, Bhishma was forced to lower his weapons as Shikhandi rode in Arjuna's chariot. Arjuna hid behind Shikhandi and attacked Bhishma with his arrows. Thus, Shikhandi was instrumental in Bhishma's death in the Kurukshetra and the victory of Pandavas.

ARTHANARISHWARAR AND LAKSHMI NARYANAN

Ardhanarishvara form is an androgynous composite of Shiva and goddess Parvati. Different Puranas have different reasons behind Arthanarishwarar the perfect combination of Purusha and Prakriti, symbolizes that the male and female principles are inseparable.^[3] A similar union between Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity and Vishnu, her husband Vishnu, forms the androgynous Lakshmi-Narayan.

CONCLUSION

In spite of the rich and varied heritage of transsexual individuals in the form of divinity and heroes from Hindu mythology, these individuals are still subjected to various forms of ostracism.^[4,5] It is only in recent times that they have been given the necessary social security and an ability to integrate into the community. Furthermore, these individuals are subject to stigma and biases that make them prone to both medical, as well as mental health issues. These include substance use related and legal problems in addition to having poor working conditions and options. An integration of this marginalized community is of essence.

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