

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Examining the Variant Gender Expressions in Indian Mythology

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ABSTRACT

This paper makes an attempt to explore the sources of gender and sex transgressions documented in mythological narratives. It examines how the divine forces intervene in the process of gender and sex change of a person. The paper also interrogates how the mythological narratives play as an integral part of the lives of transgender people even in the contemporary Indian culture. It reveals the fact that the mythological narratives are considered as a seminal part in forming the community and culture of transgender people and the narratives become the authenticate accounts in forming, claiming and constructing their identities.

Key Words: Variant Gender, Transgender person, Indian mythology, gender change, sex change, identity, femininity.

1. Introduction

Laxmi Narayan Thripati (2016) in her autobiography, *Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life* states, “Vishnu is Mohini and Mohini, Vishnu.¹ This book is dedicated to our gods and goddesses... Because they get it.” As Laxmi says and hints, many transgender people in several parts of India worship different gods and goddesses as their patrons. Interestingly, a few gods and goddesses play a significant role as an integral part of the divine narratives of gender change in Indian mythology. A few instances are; the myth of goddess Yallamma, Bahuchar Mata, the story of Vishnu’s incarnation of Mohini and several versions of Ardhanarishvara concept etc. Therefore, this paper attempts to reveal how the Indian mythological narratives play a vital role in forming the identity of contemporary transgender people.

¹ Mohini (Maya) is a Hindu goddess and the only female avatar of lord Vishnu. Vishnu who is also called as Narayana transforms himself into a fair woman, Mohini to support the gods in the churning of the sea. Mohini acquires the pot of nectar (Amruta, which helps to get immortality) from the demons (Asuras who thief it) and gives it back to the gods Devas) that helps them to retain their immortality. The demons were mesmerized and defeated in the competition with gods only after looking at the beauty of Mohini. The defeat of demons was the only intension for the transformation of Vishnu into a celestial beauty, Mohini (Astika: Adi Parva: Section: XVIII. 81).

To begin with, *Ardhangi* or *Ardhangini* can be cited as the examples for the common local words used in some regions of India which lead us to envisage the concept of ‘Ardhanarishvara,’ a deity of two halves, half ‘nari’/female (Parvai) and half male (Ishvara/ Shiva). Everyday words like *Ardhangi* or *Ardhangini* are used by a husband to his wife while talking to her or addressing her in front of others. But it cannot be said accurately whether those terms are emerged due to the belief on the concept of Ardhanarishvara and its influence. There are several versions of the Ardhanarishvara narratives that are popular in India with which the transgender people associate themselves. Transgender people may associate with the narrative because of the fluid form, and reason that the deities transgress the constructed notions of gender and sexual boundaries. However, the sexual transgression is not practically or technically indicated in the narratives. It is not due to the practical aspect but an idea of gender change make transgender people to rely on the mythological narratives.

A good number of narratives reveal how the divine forces interfere in changing one’s gender or sex. Several instances explore how the boon or curse of the gods and goddesses cause the persons to loose or gain their masculinity or femininity and how genders and sex undergo changes suddenly and unexpectedly. There are also mythological narratives which document the pregnancy of a man or a woman whose gender or/and sex gets changed eventually. The narratives may or may not authenticate the experiences or the existence of the variant gender people in the past; however, they facilitate an idea of gender and sex change.

2. Gender Fluidity in Mythological Narratives

A narrative on the unity of Sati and Shiva which is familiar to the concept of Ardhanarishvara is explained in *The Linga Purana: Part I* (1951) thus, “At the beginning of the creation Brahma had created a Being (Rudra, means Shiva) possessed of a body half man’s and half women’s and then the Creator said, ‘Divide thyself.’ And he being accosted thus divided himself into two. It was then she was born. All the women in three worlds are born of the female part. Similarly, all the eleven Rudras originated from his male part. Everything feminine in gender is she herself and everything masculine is Rudra himself” (p. 19. 27-33). Speaking on the gender hierarchy in terms of using the above-mentioned phrases ‘half man’ and ‘half women,’ Ellen Goldberg (2002) in her book *Lord Who is Half a Woman: The Ardhanarishwara in Indian and Feminist Perspective* points out:

.....This epithet does not translate as “half-man, half-woman,” as **Frederique Marglin (1989)** suggests, but rather as the “lord who is half woman” (Marglin 216). This immediately suggests a gender hierarchy in the sense that the status of the male Siva half, is privileged by the title “*Isvara*” (god, lord, master), whereas the female Parvati half with whom Siva shares his body, is simply designated by “*nari*” (woman). In other words, the name does not convey an equivalent status for both halves. (p. 1)

Goldberg proposes the idea of gender equality against the androgynous Hindu god Shiva who is represented as the superior power. However, merging of two genders or sexes can also facilitate the idea that everyone possesses both the feminine and masculine qualities irrespective of their genders and sexes. It may also hint about the concept and understanding of hermaphroditism which refers to a person having both male and female genitals which is witnessed rarely in the contemporary period. However, a seminal

point to be noted at the context is that the Ardhanarishwara deity propagates the idea of merging of two genders but not the two sexes (genitals). The idea of merging of two sexes (genitals) seems ambiguous in connection with the concept of Ardhanarishwara. Therefore, on what extent the mythological narratives are reliable is a difficult question to be answered all the time.

Pointing out the reliability of myths Devdutt Pattanaik (2014) states, “Within the infinite myths lies the eternal truth/ Who sees it after all?/ Varuna has but a thousand eyes/ Indra a hundred/ And I, only two” (p. 34). Since the merging of two halves of male- man (Shiva) and female- woman (Parvati) seems ambiguous and unreliable it should be taken as the emblematic description. Therefore, it can be said that it is only such transgressions or transformed nature of gender and sex that get connected to the present transgender people in an Indian context and it is only the psychological and emotional connection that the transgender people have with such narratives. These views may support the argument that it is not always possible and easy to discern what it is to be a variant gender or gender fluid. This sort of deities and concepts encourage the transgender people to express the desired genders and even to authenticate their existence. Till day in many parts of India people who worship *Shivalinga*² that symbolizes both ‘ling’ (phallus) and ‘yoni’ (vagina) strongly believe on this concept of Ardhanarishvara. The other terms like Shiva-Shakti and Prakriti-Purusha are also closely associated with the concept of Ardhanarishvara. Hence the narratives connected to the above-mentioned terms are also analyzed in this section.

One of the other seminal texts, *The Bhagavata Purana: Part I* (1950) describes, “Brahman, as both (*Prakrti* and *Purusa*) are interdependent (for their manifestation) and eternal, Prakrti never leaves Purusa. Just as the existence of smell and the earth (the smelling substance) or of taste and water cannot be mutually separate, *Prakrti* and *Purusa* cannot be logically discontinuous (i.e. cannot exist separately)” (p. 382. 17-18). Thus, this symbolic fusion of Ishvara-Parvati and Purusha- Prakrti reveals us that it is the inseparable concept which debunks the gender binaries not only through the instances of Ardhanarishvara but also through the narratives of Vishnu who changes his gender and becomes Mohini.

3. ‘Divine Interruption’ in the Change of Gender and Sex

The phrase ‘Divine Interruption’ does mean in this context the change of gender or sex of a person that happens due to the boon granted to the person by the gods or goddesses. Anger or curse by the gods or goddesses towards the persons can also cause the gender or sex change, for particular period sometimes and for the rest of life other times. The ‘divine interruption’ happens in gender and sex change for several reasons as already mentioned.

For instance, P.C Roy (1884) in *Mahabharata* mentions Urvasi’s curse on Arjuna, who passes his time among women as a man who lacks manhood, a dancer and as a eunuch (Vana: Indra Parva: Section: XLVI. 104). Arjuna spends a year in incognito by the name Brihannala, as a dancer without manhood (Vana: Indra Parva: Section: XLVI. 105), wearing a female dress to fulfill the curse of Urvasi. The terms

² *Shivalinga* in Kannada is the black round stone symbolizes both ‘ling’ (phallus) and ‘yoni’ (vagina) and worshipped as a god in Hindu religion and tradition on the name of lord Shiva.

‘Destitute of manhood’ and ‘without manhood’ are used to refer to a man without masculinity. At the same time, the term “eunuch- transvestite” (p. 111) used by Devdutt Pattanaik draws an attention to a fact that the western term ‘transvestite’ is used as an alternative for a ‘cross dresser’ sometimes, but they are not the same. Arjuna, a ‘man without manhood’ who wears female dress for a short period cannot be compared with the transvestite because a transvestite is a person who associates more with the gratification of dress code than the ‘destitution of manhood.’ A transvestite wishes to wear the dress of an opposite gender by choice for his/her psychological gratification. But Arjuna does not wear the female dress out of his interest or desire rather for the fulfillment of Urvasi’s curse, living in disguise to rescue from the Kouravas as per the condition. Therefore, “eunuch- transvestite” used by Devdutt is an inappropriate term to be used in the context. However, it is not clearly mentioned in *Mahabharata* whether Arjuna who was called as Brihannala was sexually impotent, an effeminate or a cross dresser but it was the curse of Urvasi, a celestial nymph (apsara) as mentioned in many versions of Hindu mythology. Although the sexually impotent, effeminate cross dresser Brihannala would restore the manhood after the completion of a year’s curse the character is mentioned in connection with the sex and gender deviance by the scholars.

Unlike the instance mentioned above, another example of Shikhandi’s³ sex change, though not technical, gets associated with the concept and practice of gender and sex change opted by the contemporary transgender people; Duryodhana asked Bhishma about the story of Shikhandi, a woman who becomes a man. Duryodhana also reveals the truth that Krishna knows that Bhishma would not fight against a woman. That is the reason Krishna made Shikhandi as a charioteer of Arjuna on the ninth day of Kurukshetra. As planned and expected by Krishna, Bhishma soon after seeing Shikhandi who is standing in front of him at the battle field said that he would not fight with a woman and got killed by Shikhandi in the battlefield. Thus, the narrative hints that even though the gender and sex of Shikhandi are changed Shikhandi remains as a woman to Bhishma. It is witnessed that like Bhishma, people who

³ Shikhandi was one of the important characters in *Mahabharata* who fought in the war of Kurukshetra for Pandavas, the brothers-in-law and became responsible for the death of Bhishma. Shikhandi was the incarnation of Princess Amba. Amba was the eldest daughter of Kashya, the king of Kashi. She was secretly in love with Salva, the king of Salwa. As both the lovers planned, she was supposed to place the garland (varamala) on his neck. Unfortunately, along with her two sisters Ambika and Abalika she was abducted by Bhishma, the Kuru prince for his step-brother Vichitravirya. No other suitors could stop him even Selva who got defeated in the fight between them. Unaware of the feelings of Amba for Selva Bhishma took her with her sisters to Hastinapur and arranged for the marriage with Vichitravirya with the suggestion of Satyawati, the mother of Vichitravirya and step-mother of Bhishma. She soon approached Bhishma and told her love towards Selva. Bhishma decides to send her with great respect while the other two sisters of her got married to Vichitravirya. Unfortunately, she got rejected by her lover, Selva. Rejected and heartbroken Amba went back to Bhishma accusing him of the problem. Vichitravirya rejected her to marry even after Bhishma convinced him. So, she forced Bhishma to marry her but he rejected it and he tells her that he has taken the oath of celibacy (His step-mother Satyawati tells him that her own son will inherit the throne. So, to ensure her wish he takes the oath). Then Amba asks various kings to defeat him but nobody could do. She was also advised to take help of Parashurama, the guru of Bhishma. When he also could not defeat Bhishma, she left to the forest to do the penance so that she can have rebirth as a man and take revenge on Bhishma. She continued her penance for twelve years. Finally, goddess Ganga listened to her tale and furious Ganga, the mother of Bhishma cursed her. God Shiva appeared and blessed her next birth saying that she would be born to the king of Drupada of Panchala. Pleased with the boon of Shiva, Amba jumped into the fire on the bank of river Yamuna. The childless king Drupada who asked for the birth of son got a boon from Shiva who told that the girl would be born to him but will transform into a boy. As a boon Shikhandi was born and taken the revenge on Bhishma by being the charioteer of Arjuna in the war.

have the conventional mindsets and convictions about gender roles are still present in the contemporary Indian society.

Even in present situation people treat transgender persons as ‘men only’ or as the ‘men who act as women’ rather than treating them as they identify themselves, or as they are. One such instance is witnessed when I visited the house of one of my transgender friends, Tulsi. A born male Tulsi has changed her gender and sex and identifies herself as a woman. Since our meeting was not planned before I could not find her in house. Therefore, I enquired her neighbors about her return to the house. They told, ‘we don’t know about “him.”’ The conversation I had with the people around made me understand that’ like Bhishma thought of Shikhandi as a ‘woman,’ people still consider Tulsi as a “man” though she believes herself as a complete woman. People still recognize and address her as a man, a born male but not as a woman as she identifies herself.

Another instance in *Mahabharata* hints that the variant gender people are not harmful to women because they are sexually impotent. Damayanti, the daughter of Bhima and the princess of Vidarva desires to see her husband Nala, the king of Nishadhas. Nala was living in disguise as Vahuka in the country of the king Koshala, Rituparna. Once, when the king of Koshala learned that there was a *swayamvara*⁴ in the country of Bhima, he went to the palace with Nala. The roaring sound of chariot made Damayanti feel that her husband has come to the *swayamvara*. At the context she says that he was truthful to her and ‘respects all the other women as eunuchs do’ (Vana: Nalopakyana Parva: Section: LXXIII. 156). The term eunuch used in this context facilitates two meanings; the one, the sexual orientation point of view, that a eunuch will not be attracted towards women sexually or erotically and the other is sociological and psychological point of view, that a eunuch is harmless towards women. However, an interesting fact witnessed several times is that most the transgender people act or behave aggressively towards the men most of the times; may be because of their romantic and sexual attraction towards men since they believe that they are women inside (whether they are castrated or not, and have gone through surgery or not). The other reason for aggressive behavior sometimes shown by the transgender people towards the men may be because of the violence caused by their fathers and brothers. It is the patriarchal mindset that makes men in the families not to accept their sons or brothers as gender deviant people. That becomes the reason for torture and punishment when the inner feelings and desires are expressed by the sons or brothers in the families.

The other seminal text *The Bhagavata Purana: Part III* (1955) mentions the story of Ila, a born female becomes a man later. The royal sage and the king of Dravidas (Dravida country), Satyavrata attained spiritual knowledge by worshipping the god and became Manu (Shraddha deva). He took birth as the son of Vivashvatha and Sanjna and got married to Shraddha. He was sad for being a childless. So Vashishta (family preceptor) performed a sacrifice in the honor of Mitra and Varuna. Shraddha approached the holy priest and requested to be blessed with a daughter. Thus born Ila after propitiating to the gods. Manu who expected to have a son felt unhappy and complained to the priests for this reversal

⁴ *Swayamvara* was an ancient custom of marriage in which a bride (a princess usually) would choose her husband by her will and wish in presence of her parents in the gatherings of many suitors (princes).

act. Then Vashista told that he would fulfill his wish to have a son, hence prayed lord Vishnu who conferred on him the boon sought for. By the grace of the boon Ila became Sudyumna.

Once, Sudyumna went to the forest on foothills of Mount Meru where lord Shiva and Uma were sporting. Soon after entering into the forest his sex changed and he got transformed as a woman. While this transformed beautiful woman was wandering in the forests she met lord Budha (the son of king Soma). They got married and begot a son named Pururava. At that time the woman remembered the sage, Vashistha who pitied on for her condition. So he approached Shankara to restore the manhood (p. 1129. IX. 1. 37). Shankara then told, “Sudyumna who is born of your race, shall be a man for one month and a woman for another month alternatively. May he protect the earth at his will, under this arrangement” (p. 1129. IX. 1. 37). Thus, Sudyumna ruled his country though he was not accepted by anybody. He later handed over the country to his son Pururava and left to the forest to perform penance. However, the text *Katha Saritsagara: Volume IV* seems different since the term eunuch is used as a man who does not have his genitals:

Princess Vidyadhari utters in grief when her husband Prabhakara does not embrace her while sleeping, “Alas, I am undone. How have I come by a eunuch as my lord? Vimala, the father of Prabakar was worried about this after listening to Vidyadhari. She told the fact to her father Surasena who became angry on Vimala. Vimala was advised by his minister to pray and get a boon by a Yaksha named Sthulasiras. As a boon Yaksha offered his genitals to Prabakara. Prabakara became man and Yaksha, a eunuch. (Towny, p. 226)

But in another story from the same text the ‘eunuch’ was used as an ‘impotent man’ like in other several texts, having connection with the story of queen Abhaya who falls in love with a Brahmana named Sudarshana (p. 106). Such stories of gender and sex change have been an integral part of Indian mythology. It could be witnessed how gender and sex get changed as easy as changing the dresses due to the curses or for different reasons by the divine forces (god or goddesses). It is also said that the *Ramayana* mentions the people who identify themselves ‘neither men nor women. A transgender friend, Tulsi who identifies as a woman narrates in her words how the narratives influence the collective memory of the contemporary transgender people. She narrates the story: ‘A group of people who accompanied Rama to the forest to send him off to exile stood over the bank of river, the place from where Rama left to the exile. After Rama returns he asks them who are they. They said before he started his exile he said to the people gathered over there, ‘men and women to return to the kingdom.’ But they are ‘neither men nor women so they kept waiting for his return so that they can be free from his order. Impressed by their devotion, Rama said that they will be treated as a good omen and good things will happen if they show their faces (*Managala mukhi*)⁵ and grace the persons in the special occasions like marriage and naming ceremony of the child’ (Tulsi, personal interview, October 15, 2018). According to this belief transgender people in

⁵ ‘Managala mukhi’ is a term used in Kannada to address the transgender people who identify themselves as women. Most of them refuse to be called as ‘Managala mukhis’ since they feel that the term has negative connotation because the term ‘Managala means good and ‘mukhi’ means face; a face of good omen. Some of them have the opinion that if a few are addressed as ‘Managala mukhis’ in the transgender community, does it mean that the other persons who express different gender expressions show bad omens?

few parts of India are invited to the naming ceremonies and marriages as their cultural ritual *badhayi* to grace the occasions till today.

4. Conclusion

With above instances the paper reveals that the variant gender expressions in mythology are interpreted in such different perspectives irrespective the association with the modern practices such as sex change, surgery, hormonal therapy and castration. The paper further explores that no gender transgressive behaviors of the persons are represented in mythologies without any divine interruptions. An interesting point to be noted in the paper is that lived experiences of the variant gender people in the past were not directly witnessed though their existence is documented in the several historical accounts. However, there are the ample amounts of instances for variant gender or fluid gender characters in mythological sources. It is argued in the paper that despite the fact that the sources reveal a few similar gender expressions, the elements of gender variance or gender fluidity hardly represent the aspects of transgenderism. At the same time it cannot be denied that the hints of such characteristics stem from the roots of mythology. Another interesting fact witnessed through the sources explored in this paper is that there are instances of men expressing the femininity or becoming women but not the women representing gender variance. Unfortunately, till today women who identified as transgender men are rarely seen in society, culture and in literature. The one who believes and identifies as a woman (transgender woman) is seen in a large number unlike the females who are born with the men's gender expressions. Though these instances of divine forces' interference in changing the gender or sex of a man are mythical, the contemporary transgender people authenticate their identities through the narratives of mythology by worshipping many gods and goddesses even in their cultural rituals. Thus, the mythical narratives yet not reliable, play a vital role in forming the transgender identities and are considered as an integral part of transgender culture.

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