TRANSGENDER COMMUNITY IN INDIA: A STUDY ON THE RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL HISTORY

Mr. Habin. H

Ph. D Research Scholar in English
T. K. M College of Arts and Science, Karikode, Kollam
University of Kerala

Abstract

The present research paper investigates the earlier references of transgender community in Indian texts and culture. Even though Indian culture and society are homophobic in nature, the presence of transgender community could be traced in earlier Indian religious and non-religious texts. Thus, one can say that gender nonconformity existed in India since the time of antiquity. Thus, through the present research paper, the researcher tries to trace a history and tradition (mainly religious and cultural) of the transgender community in India.

Keywords: Transgender, Culture, Community, Tradition.

Introduction

Transgenders are people who have gender expression that deviates from the sex that they were assigned at the time of birth. Transgender is an umbrella term which includes trans men and trans women. The presence of transgenders can be traced even from the time of antiquity. In India, the earliest references of transgender identities can be taken from our age-old religious texts and other classical books. Thus, the concept of transgender identity is not a new thing to our society. Even though the transgender community in India has a great religious and cultural tradition of their own, they face a lot of problems due to the homophobic mindset of the mainstream society.

Religious and Cultural History of the Transgender community

Transgender community in India comprises of Hijras, eunuchs, Kothis, Aravanis, Jogappas, Shiv-Shakthis etc. Eunuchs have existed since 9th century BC. Hijra is an Urdu word, as can be seen from the form itself, the word has its Semitic root in the language of Arabic. The word means "leaving one's tribe". The word also has roots in Greek language which means "Keeper of the bed". Ancient Vedic culture recognized three genders. The Vedas (1500 BC - 500 BC) describe individuals as belonging to one of three separate categories, according to one's nature or 'Prakrit'. We can also see this in *Kama Sutra* (4th century AD) and elsewhere as pumsprakrtistri (male-nature), prakrti (female-nature), and tritiya-prakrti (third nature). Various texts suggest that third sex individuals were well known in pre-modern India and included male bodied or female-bodied people as well as intersexual, and that they can often be recognized from childhood.

Allusions on transgenders can be found in the ancient Indian legal text *Manusmriti* and also in the sexology text *Kamasutra*. Characterising transgenders as "eunuchs", *Manusmriti* adopted a sheer unsympathetic attitude towards transgenders. *Manusmriti* considers transgenders as detestable and strictly stated that they should be excluded or kept out of the ritual rites done for deceased persons and also from all holy ritualistic ceremonies. Vatsyayana in his third chapter 'Auparishtaka' in *Kamasutra*, stated about a particular section different from male and female sections known as 'tritiya' nature or third gender. The 'tritiya' nature pointed by Vatsyayana denotes the transgenders and they are called as third gender in the present society. Vatsyayana's views and statements on 'tritiya' nature is apparently evident in the transgenders. The stated 'tritiya' nature, male have female attire and wears female costumes, and females wear male costumes. A third sex is also discussed in ancient Hindu law, medicine, linguistics and astrology. The foundational work of Hindu law, the *Manu Smriti* (200 BC - 200 AD), gives the explanation of the biological sex. It says that a greater quantity of male seed causes the production of male child, a female child by the prevalence of the female and if both, which means the male and female seeds are equal and there is a chance of the production of a third-sex child or girl and boy twins; if either are weak or deficient in quantity, a failure of conception results. If one observes the grammar of the ancient language Sanskrit, we can find the fact that the language has three grammatical genders which are derived from three natural genders. The earliest Tamil grammar, the *Tolkappiyam* (3rd century BC) also refers to hermaphrodites as a third 'neuter' gender (in addition to a feminine category of un- masculine males). In Vedic astrology, they had their own precise science where they say there are nine planets in the universe and each planet is assigned to different genders. The third gender called or termed as 'tritiya-prakrti', is associated with the planet of Mercury, then Saturn (in particular) which is culturally termed as 'Ketu'. In the Puranas, one can see also the references to three kinds of 'devas' of music and dance: 'apsaras' (female), 'gandharvas' (male) and 'kinnars' (neuter).

Talking about the evolution of transgender community in India, one can say that transgender persons had been part of Indian society for centuries. Historical evidence can be traced for the purpose. Recognition of "third sex" or persons who do not confirm to male or female gender have been seen in the beginning writings of ancient India. The concept of 'tritiyaprakriti' or 'napumsaka' (character of mixed nature) had been an integral part of the Hindu mythology, folklore, epic and early Vedic and Puranic literatures. Most of the population of India must be knowing the term 'napumsaka' and it had been used to denote the absence of procreative

ability, presented by signifying difference from masculine and female roles. Thus, we can say that some of the early texts extensively dealt with issues of sexuality and the idea of third gender. In one of the earliest Indian ideological belief system like Jainism and its beloved texts mention the concept of 'psychological sex', which emphasized the psychological make-up of an individual, distinct from their sexual characteristics. Indian epic *Ramayana* narrates the story of the wanderings and adventures of Rama, one of the 'avathars' (incarnation of a deity) of Lord Vishnu. According to the story Lord Rama was asked to leave his kingdom by his step mother because of the promise that his father had made to her. At this juncture when he was leaving for the forest for 14 years, he turns to his followers and asks all the 'men and women' to return to the city. Many religious interpretations say that among his followers, the hijras alone did feel bound by this direction and decide to stay with him. Impressed with their loyalty, Rama sanctioned them the power to confer blessings on people on auspicious occasions like child births and marriages, and also at inaugural functions which, it was supposed to set the stage for the custom of 'bathai' in which hijras sing, dance and confer blessings.

Another Indian epic *Mahabharata* too has a similar story. It is about the character called Aravan, the son of Arjuna (a Pandava prince) and Nagakanya (a serpent virgin), offer to be sacrificed to Goddess Kali (Goddess of destruction) to ensure the victory of the Pandavas in the Kurukshetra war, the only condition that he made was to spend the last night of his life in marriage. Since no woman was willing to marry one who was doomed to be killed, the epic goes narrating that Krishna assumed the form of a beautiful woman called Mohini and married him. Thus, it has been said that the Hijras of Tamil Nadu considered Aravan as their progenitor and call themselves as Aravanis.

References and presences of transgenders can further be traced in epic poetries like *The Mahabharata* and *The Ramayana*. Most of them are already known to public. The Shikandi (a character of mixed nature) in *Mahabharata* attained more publicity than the Shikandi in *Ramayana*. Shikandi is the rebirth or reincarnation of Amba, the daughter of king of Kashi. Shikandi lived with the aim to kill Bhishmar, the one who insulted Shikandi in the first birth. During Kurukshetra war, Shikandi fought in the side of Pandavas and became one of the factors that paved way to the success of Pandavas in the war. In order to kill Bhishmar, who has blessed with fair death, Arjuna tactfully fought war with Bhishmar by placing Shikandi in front. Bhishmar, who has taken an oath not to fight war with women or an effeminate person, has been killed by Arjuna and Shikandi at the end. Shikandi who had close ties with the Pandavas is also seen presented in Arjuna's son Abhimanyu 's wedding, to offer blessings and benedictions.

Kerala, the southernmost state of India, too has traditions or myths related to transgender community. Transgenders of Kerala, take part in the 'chamayavilakku' festival of Kottankulangara Devi Temple at Chavara, Kollam with immense joy. We can see, the number of transgenders is increasing year after year. This ritualistic fest is a landmark in the history of temples. On every tenth and eleventh of Malayalam month Meenam, men who are really willing to be 'purushanganas', dress up like women to take 'chamayavilakku' in front of Devi with hymns and prayers; for the fulfillment of their desires. The so-called 'kottan' is a delicacy that is taken from or extracted from coconut and it is the offering for Devis who is basically called as Vana Durga. Hence, the temple got titled as Kottankulangara Devi Temple. Once, some boys who were rearing cattle in the grassy marshlands got a coconut and they tried to open it by hitting it against a rock and suddenly the rock began to bleed. The villagers came to know this and they went for a 'devaprashna' (an astrological practice to understand the will of God). It was found that Goddess Durga (Goddess of war) is dwelling in that rock and they decided to build a temple for her and began to give 'kottan' as oblation. It was offered by the people that children would dress up like girls on the festival day. Devi was very impressed to see the devotion of the villagers and made herself visible to them. This was the myth. Men who are willing to take 'chamayavilakku' (wooden lamps) with great penance will be prettifying themselves with the help of their family members. These are people who are dressing up like women before or after coming to the temple for the fest. 'Chamayapuras' (make up rooms for cross-dressing) and make-up artists are available on those days to decorate men. Many people from all over Kerala come here to partake in this 'chamayavilakku' fest irrespective of their cast and creed. There is no direct link between transgenders and the fest and there are no visible influences in the myth also. The festival has been considered as a visible exhibition of the influence of cultural practice. This festival is considered as a platform of acceptance for transgenders.

Centuries back, *Brahmandapurana* gives a clear exposition on transgender, the definition and the process of the formation. An infant is formed or born as a matter of fact of male-female copulation. During the intercourse, the male semen which enters into the uterus combines with the blood in the uterus and finally results in the formation of infant. As stated in the *Brahmandapurana*, it is the rate of the mixture of the semen blood combinations in the uterus that is accountable for the infant's gender. If the rate of blood is higher in the mixture of semen blood combination, then the gender will be male and if vice versa the gender will be female. On the contrary, if the rate of blood and semen is equal and balanced in the mixture then it will give rise to the third gender or eunuch. According to *Brahmandapurana*, the birth of eunuch is also an outcome of a natural process. It is often believed that the transsexual form of Lord Shiva is a coordination of male and female.

Conclusion

Indian society tries to repress transgenders by addressing them commonly as eunuchs. There is clear information regarding such personalities in legends and sagas. Modern science attempts to define transgenders as people who are outwardly masculine and inwardly feminine. It is just another gender identity. Like science, Indian culture and religion also defined this third gender as just another human identity. References in religious and non-religious texts like *Brahmandapurana*, *The Mahabharata*, *The Ramayana, Tolkappiyam*, *Manusmriti* etc could be taken as examples. Thus, the community has a great tradition of their own. But at the same time, discarding this tradition, the Indian society tries to repress the transgender identity and marginalize people of gender nonconformity.

References
1. Aldrich, Robert. Who is Who in Gay and Lesbian History: From Antiquity to the Mid- Twentieth century? Routledge, 2000.
2. Butler, Judith. Gender Performativity- Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity. Routledge, 1997.
3. Joseph, Shaji. Moonnaam Lingam, Linganeethikkayulla Nilavilikal. Chintha Publications, 2015.
4. Nanda, Serena. Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India. Wadsworth Publishing a Company, 1999.
5. Pattanaik, Devdutt. Shikhandi and Other Stories, they don't Tell You. Penguin, 2014.
6. Reddy, Gayatri. With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India. Yoda Press, 2005.
7. Revathi, A. The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story. Trans. V. Geetha. Penguin Books, 2010.
8. Sahadevan, M. Towards Social Justice and Nation Making. Sophia D.G, 1993.
9. Surendran, P. Hijidakalude Porul. DC Books, 2008.