

## Deconstructing transphobic fallacies and unveiling the realities of transgender phenomenology in India: An empirical inquiry

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**Abstract** - The community of the trans-gendered or the gender diverse or the gender nonbinary has been the cause of many debates in recent times over their claim of equal rights of existence in India. While several first world countries have taken or are in the course of taking adequate steps to ensure their inclusion among the general masses, India despite its long history of accommodation and tolerance has fallen behind. This is largely in lieu of the prevalent discourse classifying any form of sexuality and gender that does not conform to the heteronormative gender binary as unnatural and a product of westernisation. This paper endeavours to elucidate and scrutinize the Queer and specifically Trans elements embedded within Indian Mythologies, as manifested in the Veda, Purana, Dharma-Shastra, Kama-shastra, Natyashastra, and numerous other sacred texts. By doing so, it attempts to subvert the prevailing narrative that enforces their exclusion. In addition to that, it provides a comprehensive survey of gender fluidity as depicted in Indian mythologies and ancient texts, thereby illuminating the obscured heritage of progressive advancements in gender studies within the Indian context. Moreover, it underscores the contrived essence and artificial construct of the gender binary, while emphasizing the futility of steadfastly adhering to its purported "naturalness".

**Keywords:** trans-gendered; gender diverse; gender nonbinary; transgender phenomenology; sexuality and gender

## I. INTRODUCTION

Foucault (n.d.; cf. Boyarin & Castelli, 2001) had put forward in *The History of Sexuality*, “If sex is repressed, that is, condemned to prohibition, nonexistence, and silence, then the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression. A person who holds forth in such language places himself to a certain extent outside the reach of power; he upsets established law; he somehow anticipates the coming freedom” (Foucault). One of the foremost issues that emerged in the twentieth and twenty-first century which matches the tenors of the questioning attitude against social imposition that Foucault had envisioned, is that of gender, sex and identity. This includes questioning dichotomies based on beliefs about heteronormativity and strict gender binary that either no longer hold true and/or are based on a presumptive fallacy.

It is no wonder then that taking recourse to such language and/or aligning oneself to it would draw the ire of the state and those vested in the established power structure who would regard such discourse of deviation from established norms as an attempt at subversion. In India, this has culminated in attacks both verbal and physical, perpetuated by intolerance and ignorance, severely putting at risk the physical and mental health of those who identifies with such communities. All these have been done at the implicit consent of the state who is trying to justify its opposition by building up a narrative of this being contrary to our ‘culture’.

This paper seeks to trace and examine the Queer and specifically Trans elements in Indian Mythologies which find their reference in the Veda, Purana, Dharma-Shastra, Kama-shastra, Natyashastra, and myriad other sacred texts and thereby undermining the prevalent narrative. It also presents an overview of gender fluidity in the Indian mythologies and ancient texts that highlights the lost legacy of liberal advancement in gender studies in India and the constructed nature and artificiality of the gender binary and futility of clinging to it by proclaiming its ‘naturalness’.

Gender and sex constitute and influence a considerable portion of an individual’s identity. While often used interchangeably in the past, it has presently come to denote completely different things altogether. Sex is the biological set up of a person, a combination of anatomical, endocrinal, and chromosomal features which make someone female and male (Eckert & McConnellGinet, 2013). In Gayle Rubin’s words: ‘Sex is sex, but what counts as sex is culturally determined and obtained’ (Gayle)

Gender, thus, is not something we are born with and not something we have, but something we do (Zimmerman, 1978-1979) or something we perform (Butler, 1990). It is a system of roles and values assigned to the biological traits and functions that society has determined must align with what it considers the norm.

Butler (Butler, 1990) argued that far from being a set of fixed and stable values and roles assigned/imposed by society, gender was a performance or role enacted by individuals. gender is not a fixed category: Its meaning depends on the location, time, cultural frameworks within which it is performed. This ‘performance’ is the repeated citation iteration of the role in particular contexts. With each citation the signifier/role acquires a meaning depending on the context in which the citation occurs. Thus, gender and its meaning are constructed through repeated performances (behaving as a ‘woman’, or as a ‘man’). Hence, Judith Butler rightly says, “Identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results” (Butler, 1990). However, trapped in this gender dichotomy are the people of the ‘gender-diverse’ and transgender community who have been rendered vulnerable to stigmatisation perpetuated by those of the binary sex.

“Gender-diverse” is the term which is used to refer to persons whose gender identity, including their gender expression, is different from what is perceived as being the gender norm in a particular context at a particular point of time and includes those who do not identify with either of the binary. Transgenderism is a more specific term which was coined by psychiatrist John F. Oliven of Columbia University in his 1965 reference work *Sexual Hygiene and Pathology* (Oliven, 1965). If an individual is born as one sex but feels they align more with the gendered

characteristics assigned by society for the other sex, that person could be considered a transgender. That individual may or may not undergo surgical and hormonal reassignment, but they should not be confused with transsexual or hermaphrodites with both masculine and feminine genitalia.

## II. METHOD

A meticulous thematic analysis is undertaken to discern recurrent themes and narratives associated with transgender history, myths, and experiences. This analytical process strives to unearth overarching patterns and divergences intrinsic to the representation of transgender individuals within the Indian context. The thematic analysis endeavours to identify pivotal motifs, ideologies, and conceptual frameworks prevalent in transgender literature. This method facilitates a comprehensive comprehension of the intricate layers of transgender existence within the Indian societal framework.

By implementing these methodological strategies, this study aims to ensure a rigorous and systematic exploration of transgender literature in India. The combination of a comprehensive literature review, rigorous thematic analysis, and meticulous close reading offers a robust framework for analysing and interpreting the selected works. This methodology is vital for attaining nuanced insights into the historical roots, prevalent myths, and narrative representation of transgender individuals in India, ultimately contributing to a broader and profound understanding of the experiences of this marginalized community.

## III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1 Transgenderism in the global context and in India

A stigma and a cloud of misunderstanding surround the concepts of both gender nonconformity and transgender. As a retaliation against their gender transgressions which is incongruent with their heteronormative expectations, the cis gendered society engages in a pervasive pattern of prejudice and discrimination against them.

Even in the so-called 'first world countries', where transgenderism is not directly criminalised (unlike thirteen countries including United Arab Emirates and Indonesia), numerous obstacles are constructed that impede their daily experiences such as discrimination in economy, offensive stereotype, inappropriate the use of pronouns, and refusal of healthcare based on gender identity (Floyd, Martin, & Eckloff, 2019).

Besides attempts of violence targeted at them, cissexism, discrimination, violence, and barriers to healthcare can all contribute to the increased chance of mental health concerns as well. Research suggests that transgender individuals are almost four times as likely as cisgender people to experience a mental health condition. The U.S. Transgender Survey reveals that many of the respondents frequently experience mistreatment and discrimination, and their attempted suicide rate is nearly nine times than that of the attempted suicide rate in the U. S (Dowd, 2019).

In India, until very recently, the prevailing socio-political scenario and the legal framework had turned a blind eye to the plights of the community and refused to extend to them even the basic inalienable rights accorded to all 'humans' - "They continued to beat me, and I continued to scream. When the train stopped at Pimpri, someone shouted, "Push the creature out!" (Vidya, 2013).

With gender dichotomy deeply etched in the Indian psyche, the transgenders were and are subjected to various forms of repression, including and not limited to the acts of physical, mental and sexual violence perpetrated against them on a regular basis- "Every day I would grapple with questions like 'Will everyone disown me?', 'Will I have to become a sex worker?', 'Is my fate sealed?', 'Should I just kill myself?' I did not know who all in my life I could call mine, who would stand by me no matter what" (Laxmi).

Many of the community are denied employment the moment they disclose their trans-identity. After bitter experiences of job hunting, many qualified trans people often end up engaging in sex work, according to Deepchandra, who runs Community Empowerment Trust, an NGO for trans sex workers in Delhi (LAKSHMAN, 2022).

On April 15, 2014, the Supreme Court in its verdict of National Legal Services Authority vs. Union of India judgement, recognised that transgender people are distinct from binary people and declared them as the third gender under the Indian Constitution. On September 6, 2018, the Supreme Court scrapped Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, decriminalising homosexuality.

However, existing structures continuing to categorise people into the binary of male and female has resulted in the need for them to approach the courts or governments repeatedly for the implementation of every single aspect of the law that was passed to protect them. Trans-woman Jane Kaushik, 29, says that the discrimination against transgender persons begins at school and at home. "When I was in Class 10, a boy would daily touch me inappropriately and beat me and ask if I was a boy or a girl. In Class 11, one bully boy would demand oral sex from me inside the washroom" (LAKSHMAN, 2022).

### **3.2 Interpellation of Child Psyche into Believing in Gender-Binary**

"It doesn't matter if your son is a daughter, or your daughter is a son. What really matters is how good you are as a father or mother." (Subramaniam, 2021)

Children are not born with a genetic predisposition to associate objects to one gender or another (Rainer Banse, Bertram Gawronski, Christine Rebetz, He'le'ne Gutt, J. Bruce Morton, 2010). This develops over the years as a result of outside influences and changes as they interact with those around them. The idea of boys conforming with a conceived notion of what 'masculine' is and girls with what feminine is, are often reinforced by parents, teachers, and even the literature offered for reading at home and in schools. Popular media is also a major stakeholder in upholding the nuanced gender dichotomy by either omitting the trans community altogether or concocting a discourse that is largely mythologising, pathologizing and entrenched in fantastical stories, often treating them as abnormal and tragic spectacles. It does not shy away from being "voyeuristic and sensationalizing, and in many cases dehumanizing - depicting gender non-conforming characters as monstrous or dangerous deviants" (Frotscher, 2016). Often the cast is also heterosexual and cisgender whose misappropriation of lived experiences of the queer risk potentially caricature portrayals. For instance, we see the hyper-sexualization of transgendered Maanvi Brar played by cis-gender Vaani Kapoor in *Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui* (2021) and in *Laxmi* (2020), also played by a cis-gender man, the movie uses *Laxmi* to depict violent behaviour, like kidnapping and murder, thereby pushing the fear-mongering rhetoric that Bollywood has been using for decades against transgender communities.

### **3.3 Dissection and Rebuttal of the Stand Taken by the Union Government with respect to abolition of Article 377**

The Union Government, in a 2021 case before the Delhi High Court, has said that the judgements of the Supreme Court in *Navtej Singh Johar* and *K.S. Puttuswamy* case does not mean that homosexuality and trans-relationship have been legalized, contrary to popular belief. The Government has said that these judgements have only de-criminalized a particular human behaviour. It also pleaded that it is in the legitimate interests of the state to limit marriages of such individuals, as the conduct of marriage should be in the most natural way, implying that marriages should result in the procreation of a child. (Agarwal, 2021)

This stand taken by the government is problematic on several levels. First, it reinforces heteronormativity through its assertion of marriage as the sole legitimiser of relationships and by denying the Queers access to it. Secondly, by implying that marriages should result in procreation, it tries to trespass upon the privacy of the bedroom and seeks to determine the nature of relationships. Thirdly, its delineation of what is 'natural', exposes to stigmatisation, exclusion and vulnerability of those who it considers not.

It is nothing but ironic that the very concept of marriage that is used by conservatives as a safeguard to uphold the sanctity and legitimacy of only cisgender hetero normative relation, cannot take place in the absence of its primary witness, 'agni' or fire who is repeatedly described in the Rig Veda as "child of two births" (*dvijanman*), "child of two - mothers" (*dvimatn*), and occasionally, "child of three mothers" (the three worlds). Agni is said to have been born when two firesticks or 'arani' were rubbed together. 'The gender of the firesticks (arani), in Sanskrit, is feminine. The lower arani is laid flat, and the upper arani (referred to as "the Matron") is rapidly rubbed against it' (Vanita & Kidwai, 2000). It must also be noted that it is rubbing or friction, not

penetration, that generates fire further highlighting the queerness of its birth thereby rendering void the argument for denying those of the LGBTQ+ the right to it (Vanita & Kidwai, 2000).

William Godwin's famous example of saving the person deemed most useful to society in *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* when rescuing one of two people from a burning building suggests that lives are valuable only through work (Godwin, 1793). The "imagined space" that constitutes a nation demands procreation as one of the responsibilities of its citizens (Anderson, 1983). Inability of the queer identity to participate in the procreative duties renders them valueless in front of the Nation which may be why they are pushed towards the periphery.

This proclivity towards viewing reproduction as one of the primary obligations of citizens reveals itself in ancient Indian texts and mythologies as well. Arjuna is called a brahmachari (celibate) because he approaches his wives only for purposes of procreation, and this is one reason for his prowess in battle. Bhishma describes a man who goes to women "for the sake only of offspring" as one who overcomes all difficulties (Vyasa).

Another instance where procreative sex has been championed is in *Srimadbhagvatam* when Daksha in retaliation against Narada teaching his sons to know the divine by means of living an aesthetic life instead, accuses him of "having destroyed our religion which is obtained by begetting offspring." (Sanyal, 1984).

However, the Indian culture is replete with contradictory instances as well. In the same *Mahabharata*, Vrishaparvaa or Lord of Dharma as Krishna is so called, alters his gender to become Mohini to marry and engage in copulation with Aravan, the son of Arjun and the serpent princess to acquaint him with sexual pleasure and love, before his sacrifice to the goddess Kali to ensure victory for the Pandavas (Vyasa). This subverts the doctrine of procreative sex and the prevalent sentiments in contemporary India that calls for the prohibition of marriage of trans and the LGBTQ community at large. Aravan's acceptance of Vishnu's queerness led to the practice of Aravani tradition in Kovugam, Tamil Nadu.

A similar sentiment against procreative sex can be found in Vatsyayana's *Kamasutra*, the world's most famous work on erotics, which defines Kama as the mental inclination towards the pleasures of the senses, touch, sight, taste, and smell. Contrary to texts that identify procreation as the aim of sexual activity, the *Kamasutra*, while giving procreation due importance, states that Kama "finds its finality in itself." (Vatsyayana, 1994)

Certain Indian myths reject the presumption of fornication between two opposite cisgender individuals that accompanies the notion of procreative sex, through its introduction of the concept of miraculous births. In the Telegu versions of the Ayappa legend taken from *Brahmanda Purana*, he is born out of the intercourse between Shiva and Mohini, the female form of Vishnu.

This can be seen in the case of King Sudyumna who is cursed into becoming a woman when he accidentally stumbles upon the sporting of Shiva and Parvati. As spells cannot be reversed, only modified, Shiva decreed that the female Sudyumna, or Ila, would be a man when the moon waxed and a woman when the moon waned. He gets married to Budha, the son of the moon who has been inflicted with a curse of being neither a woman nor a man by Brihaspati. Thus, Sudyumna who was both man and woman married Boodh who was neither man nor woman. When Sudyumna turned man, Boodh was his wife and when Sudyumna turned woman, Boodh was his husband. In due course, as Ila, Sudhyumna gave birth to Pururava. The descendants of Ila called themselves the Ailas. (Joshi, 2008)

King Saudyumni drank the consecrated water meant for his wife and gave birth from his thigh (Vyasa) and King Yuvanashva drank the magic water meant for his wives and gave birth to Mandhata.

Instances of birth from heterosexual parents, homosexual parents, and a single parent, all appear in ancient and medieval Indian texts, showing an openness to different possibilities. Birth from intercourse between a human man and a human woman, a human woman and a god or a human man and a nymph may primacy of normative heterosexuality, whereas birth from a single parent may suggest a desire for freedom from compulsory heterosexual coupling, and



birth from same-sex parents, whether human or divine, an aspiration toward dual mothering or fathering outside of heterosexual marriage.

Against the delineation of what the Union Government identified as ‘natural’, it can be said that for many organisms in the animal kingdom, gender diversity nonheteronormative sexual orientation is the norm. Homosexual behaviour can be witnessed in fruit flies, moths, butterflies, and beetles. Intersexed examples of butterflies and spiders have been found that are sexually divided in half, with one side male and one side female. Creatures such as sow bugs, shrimp and oysters completely reverse their sex at some stage in their lives and such transsexuality is a routine occurrence for many Tropical coral fishes such as Clownfish, wrasses, moray eels, etc. Homosexuality among avian species is quite common and has been observed in waterfowl, sea birds, penguins, parrots, etc. Certain birds are transgender- Certain male ruffs lack the elaborate plumage that can be found in other males to attract females while behaving like female themselves, ‘For one European bird of prey, the marsh harrier, 40% of adult males look and act like females.’ (Lamb, 2016). Transgender and homosexual behaviour can also be observed among mammals as well – ‘in Bighorn Sheep, some rams identify as female and herd themselves with the ewes. While Bighorn rams typically engage in homosexual behaviour all year long, the transgender rams will only allow themselves to be mounted during the mating season when the “other” ewes are in estrus.’ female hyenas have penises, making them the official trans girls of the Animal Kingdom. It's even possible for females to achieve erections." Hyenas have to "retract" these appendages into their body in order for a male to have sex with them (Tourjée, 2017,).

### **3.4 Accommodation of the Gender Diverse under the Aegis of Myth, Culture, and Tradition of India**

Contrary to the Abrahamic western world, queerness and gender diversity were very natural in oriental India. Other than those mentioned above, there are several other instances in Hindu and Buddhist mythology and folklores of gender diversity that constitute the congeries that is our culture. A famous and well-articulated example is of Shikhandini in *Mahabharata*, who became a man, Sikhandi, as per the boon granted to her by Lord Shiva in order to seek vengeance against Bhishma for abducting her from her swyamvara in her previous life when she was Amba (Pattanaik, 2014).

There are references of the trans community in *Ramayana* as well. During Rama’s departure from Ayodhya to begin his fourteen-year exile in the forest, he was followed by several people. Touched by their support, Rama turned around and told his subjects, ‘I request all the men and women gathered here who truly love me, to please return to their homes. Once the duration of my exile is complete, I shall be back with you.’ (Laxmi) . At the completion of his exile, when Rama returned, he saw that there were several people still waiting at the same spot on the outskirts of Ayodhya where he had bid them farewell all those years ago. These were the hijras who did not return to their homes, since Rama had implored only the men and women to do so and they were neither. Overwhelmed by their dedication, Rama granted them, and future generations of hijras, a boon – the power to grant both blessings and curses to men and women, which would always come true (Srinivasan & Chandrasekaran, 2020).

In *Mahabharata*, in reply to Yudhistira’s enquiry as to who gets greater pleasure in the world: man or woman, Bhishma refers to King Bhangashvana who experienced life as both man and woman. Bhangashvana performed a yagna to secure hundred sons but overlooked Indra in his offerings to the gods. As a consequence, after fathering a hundred sons, he turned into a woman because of Indra’s curse and mothered hundred sons as well. Even after Indra was appeased, he refused to turn back to a man citing greater pleasure as a woman (Vyasa K.-D. , 1965).

Among other tales of the *Puranas* of the gender diverse and the transgender identity is the tale of Sumedhas and Samavan in the *Skanda Purana* (Srisikandamahapurana, 1986) . Afflicted with penury they decided to deceive a queen, Simantini who bestows rich gifts upon one Brahmin couple every Monday after worshipping them as the divine couple as Shiva and Shakti. Samavan disguised himself as a woman and with Sumedhas acting as the ‘husband’, introduced themselves to the queen as a ‘couple’. Simantini saw through their disguise but

carried on with her worshipping of them as the divine couple Shiva and Shakti. Such was the power of the queen's piety and her imagination that Samavan lost his manliness and became a woman named Samavati. Sumedhas was at first surprised but later agreed to marry his former friend.

This notion of gender transitions and role play is considered to be the manifestation of Ardhanarishvara created by the union of Shiva and Parvati. It is a symbol of the masculine in the feminine and vice versa- a synthesis of the mystical energies of the two genders in one entity. A similar union between Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity and her husband Vishnu, forms the androgynous Lakshmi-Narayan. These deconstructs the strict dichotomy prevalent in society today.

That the Queer identity was accepted and accommodated, manifest in the Vedas which categorise human beings according to Prakriti or Nature- 'pums-prakriti' or male, 'stri-prakriti' or female, and 'tritiya-prakriti' or the third sex (Vatsyayana, 1994). The 'tritiya prakriti' has been generally used to refer to men with homosexual orientation and sometimes women as well. They are typically characterized by a mixed male/female nature (i.e., effeminate males or masculine females) that can often be recognized within childhood (Wilhelm, 2008) . The homosexual behavior of these people is described in great detail within the eighth and ninth chapters of the second part of the *Kama Sutra*. While gay males and lesbians are the most prominent members of this category, it also includes other types of people such as transgenders and the intersexed. Thus, the concept of a third sex, with various ambiguous subcategories such as kliba, pandaka, and napunsaka (all varieties of the neutered), has been a part of the Indian worldview for nearly three thousand years.

The homosexual and the gender diverse identity is ratified in Jain philosophy as well when in a debate on if women could attain liberation, ancient and medieval Jain thinkers argue that there were three types of desire (veda): "male ,female ,and third-sex desire, of which the last was the most intense, and all of which could be experienced by anyone, regardless of biological sex. While categorizing men who desire men as "women" on the basis of their desire but simultaneously as "men" in gender, they also noted that desire may be fluid and transient." (Vanita & Kidwai , 2000) In Strinirvanaprakarana, the Jain philosopher Sakatayana also pointed out that a person may be capable of being sexually aroused by the same sex, the opposite sex or even a nonhuman animal.

Buddhist texts follow a similar course as in it, women are frequently reborn as men. Either rebirth or sex change within one's lifetime is a necessary step to become Bodhisatta. One example may be that of Manimekhalai who, to study various schools of thoughts, turns into a man because most teachers will not accept a female student. She turns back to her female form after being persuaded by the teaching of Aravana Adigal. (Vanita & Kidwai , 2000)

This reveals that the gender and/or sexual fluidity was in no way regarded as something derogatory but as natural. The erstwhile Indian culture had managed to harmonise the difference between gender and sexualities and present it to their gods for their use as per their disposition. Beside acceptance and accommodation of Queers and non-heterosexuals, gender fluidity also serves to dismantle the power structure of gender that is skewed towards 'male' by eliminating categorisation altogether. Legitimacy of the gender-diverse and non-heteronormativity in Indian culture can be traced back to the unquestioned acceptance of the gender transition brought about by curses or blessings by erstwhile social and political forces.

Instances and arguments in support of gender fluidity are many even in the religious texts of the age. In Buddhism, as mentioned above, there are many examples of women becoming bodhisattas, then becoming men, and, finally, becoming Buddhas (Paul & Wilson) . However, two women Bodhisattas, Candrottara in the third- to fourth century Candrottacarittrakaranasutram and Sumati in the third century Sumatidarikapariprccha, dispute the need to change their sex to achieve nirvana. They argue that since according to Hridaya Sutra, "Form is emptiness; emptiness is form. Emptiness is none other than form; form is none other than emptiness," no object or person has any innate characteristics ( Dorje & Lingpa,

2010). Emptiness is the only reality and thus, a woman who too has no innate characteristics, has nothing to be transformed.

A similar dispute is raised in the Vimalakirtinirdesa in which Sariputra, a monk enquires a goddess as to why she does not change her sex despite her power to do so. The goddess reveals her inability in this regard as she has found more innate female characteristics in spite of her twelve-year search for them. As a demonstration she transforms Sariputra to her likeness and back and he is compelled to admit such characteristics both exist and do not exist. The goddess plains: "Just as you are not really a woman but appear to be female in form, all women also appear to be female in form but are not really women. Therefore, the Buddha said all are not really men or women. . . . All things neither exist nor do not exist. The Buddha said there is neither existence nor nonexistence." (Paul & Wilson).

In Hinduism, Padma Purana depicts one of the most significant and overlooked instances of gender fluidity through the figure of Arjuna. The unnoticed nature of the tale is probably inherent in a narrator itself, Sanatkumara, who swears his audience, Uddhava to secrecy. In the tale, Arjuna adamantly implored Krishna to witness his divine sport ('leela') despite the former's reluctance. Krishna finally acquiesced and advised Arjuna to worship Tripurasundari who further advised him to go and take bath in a lake. Arjuna followed her advice and emerged as a beautiful woman, Arjuni. She, then, engaged in the worship of the goddess Radhika who took her to Krishna who pleased with Arjuni's devotion engaged in 'leela' with her. Afterwards Arjuna regained his former male self and was sworn to secrecy by Krishna (Vanita & Kidwai, 2000).

One way in which Hindu religious texts navigates the most rigid construct of gender is through its concept of rebirth. For instance, king Puranjana in *Shreemad Bhagvat Purana* is reborn as a woman because he died thinking of his wife. Rebirth by bringing mortality into account diminishes the importance of socially constructed categories such as gender.

In the Shanti Parva section of *Mahabharata*, composed under the influence of Buddhism, there is one of the most well-fledged and extended argument on the topic of reality of gender between King Janaka, the epitome of Hindu enlightenment and Sulabha, a yogini mendicant. She takes control of Janaka with her yogic possession, earning his condemnation for entering into a yogic union with him despite being a woman and he accuses her of being compelled by sexual desire and enquire after her husband. In reply, she demonstrates that no creature has a separate and independent existence from other creatures by referring to the trope of Vedic fire generated by the friction of sticks, she shows that all creatures are the mixture of same element. She asks: "Indeed, as thou thyself seest thy own body in thy body and as thou thyself seest thy soul in thy own soul, why is it that thou dost not see thy own body and thy own soul in the bodies and souls of others? If it is true that thou seest an identity with thyself and others, why then didst thou ask me who I am and whose?" (Ganguly K., 1998). The argument of Sulabha is strictly in line with the central Hindu tenet that the universal spirit pervades all things which in turn further confirms that nothing is abnormal or unnatural. Even the Devas and Asuras are more akin to each other than absolutely distinct. When in this context, gods and goddess are identified with the universal spirit and ultimate reality, it can be said that they encompass everything, even all apparent opposites whose illusive boundaries collapse in the universality and omnipresence of the gods. This is evident in Shiva being addressed as a series of opposites- "Thou art male, thou art female, thou art neuter" (Ganguly K. M., *The Mahabharata of Krishna Dwaipayana Vya*, 1998).

This gender fluidity emerges in the Bhakti and Sufi tradition as well where male mystics such as Surdas and even Kabir used the trope of bridal mysticism. In such poems he addresses the male God as lover or husband and identify himself with the bride waiting for the bridegroom. The Gauriya Vaishnavas, followers of Shri Chaitanya engage in the same.

The Ramanandis, an all-male community in eastern India, said to have originated in the fifteenth century, are devotees of Hanuman, the monkey god, incarnation of Shiva, and servant of Rama. The celibate devotees identify with Hanuman and other males who are said to have taken on the form of Sita's female servants in order to serve her. Through their devoted service to Sita, these "women" friends vicariously participate in her union with Rama.



Indian Sufi poetry too was influenced by ancient Indian poetics and traditions, such as , Radha-Krishna tradition of mystical love poetry as evidenced in the adoption of female persona by the poem's speaker- Madho lal Hussayn wrote: "If I play [thus] with the Beloved, I am ever a happy woman" (Krishna, 1938).

#### IV. CONCLUSION

"There isn't a trans moment... It's just a presence where there was an absence. We deserve so much more." — Hari Nef, *The New Yorker*, 2016.

The above comment is a vociferous voicing of demands of inclusivity by the marginal 'trans' and gender-diverse community who has been till now been disregarded, overlooked and pushed to the margins and whose battles have found only meagre and biased representations, if any, in literature and popular culture. However, this 'absence' has largely been a western phenomenon brought about by strict stipulations of Abrahamic religions regarding heteronormativity and gender dichotomy unlike in India where those that deviate from heteronormativity and expected gendered behaviour have found accommodation and nonchalant incorporation in their religious texts, medical treatises, commentaries, mythologies, poems, plays, etc. The current predicaments afflicting those of the trans community in India is only a recent occurrence that manifested out of the forceful imposition of the Victorian sensibilities concerning family structure and gender by the British overlords during their two-hundred-year rule that has come to pervade all strata of society, as delineated in this paper.

However, despite the monumental rulings of the Supreme Court in 2014 and 2018 that recognised the transgender people as the third gender and decriminalised homosexuality respectively, verbal, physical and mental violence perpetuated by intolerance and ignorance aimed at social exclusion are inflicted upon them on a regular basis and emancipation continues to be a distant reality.

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