

Perception of Transgenderism through Myths and Literature

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ABSTRACT

Transgenderism is a concept that has been prevailing in the society from the Vedic period and is acknowledged by both the society and people. Their presence and significance can be observed by brushing through the records like myth, legends, epic, etc. left by our predecessors. Yet, people in the present day society are still biased against the transsexuals and holds resistance towards them in the name of social taboos. Though they are forthcoming, legally recognized and are involved in many sectors, their status in the present day society is still between the rock and hard place especially in India, a so-called 'religious' nation. Thus an analysis has been done on the perception, significance and the acceptance of transsexuals through their portrayal in Hindu Mythology and modern day literature.

Keywords: Literature, Myths, Social Acceptance, Transgender

INTRODUCTION

The term "transgender" was first introduced by the German Sexologist, Magnus Hirschfeld (Somasundaram, 2009). The concept of Transgender came into limelight only in the early 20th century when US President, Bill Clinton passed the ban of same-sex marriages through US Defense Marriage Act in 1996. But many people slowly started to accept and support the same-sex marriages when Massachusetts became first state to allow it. Then it is widely accepted in main-stream society in 2015 during which the same-sex marriage was legalised (Cook, 2018). Later a blanket term "Transgenderism" was coined by

Virginia Prince covering both transsexualism and transvestism (Somasundaram, 2009). Transgender refers to a person whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from what is typically associated with their birth assigned sex (Jobe, 2013) and Transvestite refers to a person who cross-dresses.

LITERATURE REVIEW

India is land of culture where different religions and traditions co-exist supported by the vast expanse of literatures. Here, the concept of Transgenderism is deeply rooted in the history and their traces can be seen in many of the myths, tales and *puranas*. The Vedas recognised and recorded the existence of third gender (Alisha, 1028) and they are institutionalised as neither male nor female and contains the elements of both and forms sub-minority and are revered in Indian culture (Nanda, 1986).

The transgender in India are referred by varied names in the ancient texts such as *Trithiya panthi*, *Trithiya Prakriti*, *Hijras*, *Napumsaka*, *Tirunagais*, *Khoja*, *Aravanis*, *enunchs* etc. and are considered as the integral part of Indian society (Kalra, 2012). They believed to bring luck and provide special fertility power so they are invited to perform blessings at weddings, pregnancy ceremonies (*valaikappu*) and during births (DellisSwararos, 2016). Transgender are treated well by the Mughals in their court as they are considered to be clever, trustworthy and fiercely loyal. They also played a

crucial role in the politics of empire building in Mughal era (Michelrai, 2015).

Though there are many instances and mentions of transgender in myths, tales and literature, the concept was not socially and legally acknowledged in many societies until recently. Thus, this paper focuses on the tracing the footsteps of transgender in Hindu myths and literature and how they are personified and are viewed in the ancient society. Apart from this, this paper examines on how the concept of transgenderism is accepted by people in both ancient society and the present-day society by analysing the myths and literature.

MATERIALS & METHODS

The study follows qualitative approach and analyse on the varied contexts and characters of Transsexuals mentioned in Myths, Epics and Legends. The analysis involves the character description of Transsexual people, their importance or role played by them in the particular context or the whole text and the acceptance of those characters in the society where the character is born. In addition to this, a small survey was conducted by using the online writing platform namely, Manga Toon for analysing the acceptance and popularity of the same-sex love stories and comics.

DISCUSSION

For the analysis, the characters of Arjuna in Mahabharata who cross-dressed himself as female, Brihannala; Chitrangada, a female who cross-dressed as Male warrior in Mahabharata and Lady Mohini, female avatar of Lord Vishnu are chosen for this study. Let us discuss on the characteristic description of each personality.

Arjuna in Mahabharata

Arjuna, one of the Pandavas in Mahabharata, due to curse of *apasara* Urvashi, loss his masculinity for a period of One year due to Indra interception. This served as a advantage for Arjuna, to cross-dress himself as a female dancer, Brihannala during his one year exile. He became a

music teacher for King Virat's daughter and her friends (Kalra et al. 2016).

Brihannala, the cross-dressed version of Arjuna, is teacher of King's daughter and enjoys a respected position in the patriarchal society where the Mahabharata epic takes place. In that society, a teacher has the role of parent, a guide and also considered as an equal foot to Gods and is mostly performed by for Brahmins, an upper caste in Varna system. So, Brihannala, though belong to transsexual community, earned respect and worship of many people in both the court and society. The people accepted and respected Brihannala for her talent in music and dancing and let her occupy the position.

Chitrangada in Mahabharata

The story of Chitrangada is told by Rabindranath Tagore in his drama, 'Chitra'. Chitrangada is wife of King Arjuna in Mahabharata who was loved and married her for her bravery and her warrior-like character (Tiwari & Pal, 2020).

In the drama, he portrayed Chitrangada as a female who is being raised as a cross-dressed male warrior by her father. She has grown as a warrior-princess in the society where patriarchy is the rule. Her personification as a masculine female who is skilled in combat and war made her a unique existence when compared with feminine females of their society. The people in her country also loved and worshipped her for who she is.

Lady Mohini, the Female avatar of Lord Vishnu

According to Legends, Lord Vishnu adopted the disguise of Mohini, his female avatar, thrice throughout the *puranas*. First is in Mahabharata when the *devas* and the *asuras* tried to churned the ocean for *Amurtha*. It is said that he disguised himself as a seductress to divert the attention of asuras from obtaining the *Amirtha* (Srinivasan & Chandrasekaran, 2020). Second is in *Vishnu Purana* to save Lord Shiva and to destroy the *asura* named, *Bhasma-asura* who received the to burn into ashes anyone on whose head he would place

his hand from Lord Shiva and tried to burn Lord Shiva (Alisha, 2018). Third appearance is in *Linga Purana*, which portrays the merging of Lord Shiva and Mohini, the female avatar of Lord Vishnu which results in the birth of God Ayyappa (Pattanaik, 2002).

In *puranas*, Mohini is respected by the people in the society and is considered as one of the divine being because of Lord Vishnu. To *asuras*, Mohini is a seductress who deceived them and supported the *devas* in the acquisition of *amirtha*. To *devas*, Mohini is a avatar who came to salvage the situation in the mentioned three occasions. She is considered as Life-saver for *devas*. To common people who haven't witnessed Mohini, she is both mysterious and divine beings who only existed in the stories.

Among the three characters that are mentioned here, two exist in the real society and one existed in the imagination or legends. By analysing these three characters, it can be acknowledged that to common people living in the period where the epics took place, Transgenderism is a concept that is fully known because of their long and deep rooted history and at the same time, they are seen as entity outside the society because of either the character portrayal or the talent. Simply put, Arjuna and Chitrangada are the prince and princess of their kingdom who are respected and experienced higher authority in their society so it is improbable for them to experience the oppression and marginalization faced by the common people. Though there is a possibility, their impact will be lesser because of their position and their contribution like teaching and participation in war towards the society.

Perception of Transgender genre in Modern Literature

With the rise in exposure to Transgenderism, many authors have come forward to express their support through their literary works. For example, writings of Devadutt Pattanaik like *Man Who Was a Woman and Other Queer Tales From Hindu Lore*, *The Pregnant King*, *Shikhandi and*

Other Tales They Don't Tell You and *Homosexuality in Ancient India* expresses that Transgenderism was a old concept which was overlooked by us when reading or hearing myths, epics, lores and tales.

In the book '*Man Who Was a Woman and Other Queer Tales From Hindu Lore*', Devdutt wrote many narratives on Hindu lores about the gay, lesbian and hijras and expresses that the worldwide view of Hindus accepts the transgender, transvestite and homosexuals while the social acceptance and rejection is artificial dynamic (Alisha, 2018). The book '*The Pregnant King*' (2008) is written based on the tale in Mahabharata.

His work, '*Shikhandi and Other Tales They Don't Tell You*', is a collection of different myths in India. Each group in LGBT group was addressed here. For example, the story of Ratnavalli represents the Lesbian group; the stories of Somavan and Aravan represent the Gay; the Bisexual is explained in the stories of Mohini and Transgender is explained through the stories of Shikhandi and Arjuna. The concept of Cross-dressing is explained in the stories of Krishna and Samba (Alisha, 2018; Bhaduri, 2018).

Through his writings, Devdutt showed the evidences of queerness and also showed that people who existed in those lores and myths are also present in reality rather than in imagination.

On the other hand, Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* have portrayed how the character Anjum faced many adverse situations in mainstreams social spaces and how she tried to accommodate herself in the changing world (Suleman & Rahman, 2020).

Apart from the main stream literature, many of the Online writing platforms for short stories and comics like Wattpad, Webnovel, Babel novel, Dreame, WebToon and MangaToon, also encourage the genre of Same-Sex stories and plots in the recent years. The acceptance of such stories contributes nearly fifty percent when compared to other genre stories and comics.

This higher rate of acceptance shows that people are slowly but surely show acceptance and approval towards transgenderism.

CONCLUSION

Through this study, it can be concluded that the people in the mainstream society have psychologically acknowledged and accepted the Transsexual community, which is reflected through the stories and characters, extracted from the Indian Hindu Mythology since the Vedic period. It is the distance between myth and reality that created the distance and non-acceptance of LGBT community. In addition, once they overcame that barrier, the people of mainstream society will accept their presence and it can be seen by the acceptance rate of same-sex love and marriage stories and comics in many of online platforms.

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